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Review Article

Mental Health in Future Primary Education Teachers: Music as an Ally for Professional and Classroom Wellbeing

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Abstract

Introduction: Concerns about child mental health and bullying in primary schools motivated this study, framed by three complementary models of human flourishing: Seligman's PERMA model, Ryff's eudaimonic dimensions, and Diener's subjective wellbeing framework. The study examines whether music can act as a proactive pedagogical resource for psychological resilience and for reducing relational harm in the classroom.

Method: An exploratory mixed-methods design combined a closed-item questionnaire with open-ended questions, administered to a purposive sample of pre-service primary teachers (N=36) who had just completed their school practicum. A 6-point Likert scale captured quantitative attitudes, while open-ended items supported inductive thematic analysis.

Results: 47.2% of participants consider music an important academic subject, yet 75.0% see it as highly beneficial for children's mental health and 61.1% consider it effective against bullying. The qualitative analysis pointed to a strong overlap between commercially driven urban genres (reggaeton, trap, mainstream pop) in the private listening habits of both future teachers and their primary-age students.

Conclusion: Music appears to be a valuable, low-cost resource for student wellbeing, but it remains undervalued and underused in teacher training. Reforming initial teacher education to build musical competence and confidence is proposed as a policy priority.

Introduction

Children's mental health has become a growing concern in primary education, with direct implications for classroom emotional wellbeing, peer relationships, and school climate. Roughly one in seven adolescents aged 10 to 19 lives with a diagnosable mental health condition, together accounting for around 15% of the overall disease and mortality burden in this age group; depression, anxiety, and behavioural disorders are leading drivers of adolescent disability, and suicide ranks as the third leading cause of death among individuals aged 15 to 29 [1]. Left unaddressed, these conditions can carry into adulthood, reducing long-term life satisfaction — and notably, many pre-service teachers currently enrolled in higher education fall within or close to this vulnerable age range.

In this context, music is increasingly discussed not simply as an aesthetic school subject, but as a potential resource for stress reduction, emotional regulation, and social cohesion in the classroom. For this study, wellbeing is understood through three complementary lenses: [2] PERMA model (Positive Emotions, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment), Ryff's [3] six-dimension model of psychological wellbeing (autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relations with others, purpose in life, and self-acceptance), and Diener's [4] distinction between cognitive life satisfaction and affective balance. Musical competence, in turn, refers here to a teacher's practical ability and confidence to use music actively and pedagogically in the classroom, as distinct from simply valuing music in principle. Generalist teachers are educators trained to teach across the

primary curriculum without a specialised degree in music, who in most educational systems remain primarily responsible for delivering music in the classroom [5,6].

Empirical evidence links structured musical engagement — active listening, singing, and performance — to reduced psychological and physiological markers of stress [7,8], and group singing specifically has been associated with lower cortisol, improved respiratory and cardiac function, and increased release of dopamine, oxytocin, and endorphins [7–9]. Structured musical interventions have also been associated with increased prosocial behaviour and reduced bullying [10–12], and with stronger family–school engagement when used as a shared, low-barrier activity (Abad & Barrett, 2023) [13]. Spanish educational policy (LOMLOE) formally positions music, within the area of Educación Artística, as a vector for cognitive, emotional, and psychomotor development (Ministerio de Educación, Formación Profesional y Deportes, n.d.), consistent with neuroscientific evidence linking sustained musical practice to executive functioning and inter-hemispheric communication [14–17]. Folk and traditional music, in particular, has documented value for cultural identity, literacy development, and social cohesion [18,19], and family engagement through shared musical activity can extend this sense of belonging from the classroom into the home [13].

Despite this potential, music's place in primary teacher training remains precarious. Generalist teachers frequently report low confidence and considerable anxiety about teaching music, linked to limited musical training during their own schooling [20,21] — a pattern echoed by more recent research showing that many pre-service and practicing generalist teachers continue to report low self-efficacy in music teaching even where national curricula formally require it [5,6]. This gap has been linked to a broader decline in everyday singing and active music-making in primary classrooms, as under-confident teachers increasingly default to passive, pre-recorded streaming rather than live musical practice [20,22].

This study addresses the following research problem: how do pre-service primary teachers, immediately after completing their school practicum, perceive the role of music in supporting classroom wellbeing, family engagement, and anti-bullying practice — and how does this perception compare with their own sense of preparedness to deliver it? Based on the literature reviewed above, we hypothesise that pre-service teachers will report a favourable view of music's contribution to children's mental health and to reducing bullying, while at the same time reporting comparatively low confidence in the musical training they received at university — producing what we term a competency–utility gap between the perceived value of music and teachers' practical readiness to use it.

Specifically, this study aims to (1) evaluate pre-service teachers' perceptions of the curricular importance of music, the role of family involvement, the relevance of folk and popular music, the adequacy of their university training, the value of active song, and the perceived capacity of music to address mental health and bullying; and (2) explore the daily musical listening habits of pre-service teachers and their prospective

students, to understand what musical resources teachers may draw on — or default to — when using music in the classroom.

Method

To explore the intersections between teacher preparation, musical-pedagogical competencies, and multidimensional wellbeing, this study used an exploratory, convergent parallel mixed-methods design [23], collecting and analysing quantitative attitudinal data and qualitative narrative data at the same time and comparing them at the interpretation stage. This approach allows statistical trends to be cross-checked against participants' own narratives, offering a fuller picture of how pre-service educators understand music as a resource for classroom wellbeing, mental health, and anti-bullying practice.

Participants and sampling

The sample comprised N=36 third-year undergraduate pre-service teachers enrolled in the Bachelor's Degree in Primary Education at a public university in Eastern Spain. Participants were selected through purposive, non-probability sampling based on one key criterion: having recently completed their school-based practicum placement in a regional primary school. This ensured that participants' responses were grounded in real classroom experience rather than purely theoretical impressions.

Participants ranged in age from 19 to 31 years ($M = 21.4$, $SD = 2.1$). In terms of sex distribution, the sample was 72.2% female ($n = 26$) and 27.8% male ($n = 10$), consistent with the gender distribution typically documented in primary education degree programs in Southern Europe.

Methodological note on sample size: With N=36, this study cannot support broad statistical generalisation. It functions instead as an exploratory, diagnostic study suited to identifying patterns worth investigating in a larger sample [24], rather than as confirmatory evidence. This exploratory framing is consistent with recent methodological guidance distinguishing data saturation — adequate for descriptive, exploratory mapping of an under-researched issue, as is the case here — from theoretical saturation, which is required only when a study aims to build or test explanatory theory [25].

Instrument

Data were collected through an ad-hoc electronic questionnaire administered securely via Google Forms, with two sections:

- Quantitative module: seven items on a 6-point Likert scale (1 = Not at all important/relevant, to 6 = Extremely important/relevant). A 6-point scale without a neutral midpoint was chosen deliberately to reduce central-tendency bias and encourage directional responses. The items covered three areas: (a) institutional and curricular valuation of music, (b) community and family involvement, and (c) the perceived capacity of music to address mental health and bullying. The full item wording is reproduced in Annex A.

- Qualitative module: three open-ended questions exploring participants' daily musical consumption, the perceived influence of algorithmic platforms (e.g., TikTok, Spotify) on young people, and the internal and external barriers to integrating music creatively in primary schools. The full item wording is reproduced in Annex B.

Procedure, data analysis, and ethical considerations

The study proceeded in three phases:

1. Conceptualisation: a review of national educational frameworks (LOMLOE) and focus-group discussion within the university helped anchor the operational definitions of wellbeing, classroom toxicity, and flourishing used in the study.
2. Data collection: the questionnaire was distributed through the institution's secure Virtual Learning Environment over a three-week window immediately after students completed their practicum, to keep their experiences fresh.
3. Analysis: quantitative data were analysed descriptively (frequencies, means, percentages). Qualitative responses were coded and analysed inductively following Braun and Clarke's [26] thematic analysis approach, with initial codes grouped into broader themes (e.g., algorithmic uniformity, generational convergence).

Data management complied with institutional research ethics requirements and the EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). Participation was voluntary, unpaid, and fully anonymised through automatic encryption of digital identities. Access to the survey required participants to first read and accept a digital informed consent form, in line with the Declaration of Helsinki.

Results

Quantitative attitudinal data

This theme compares how important participants consider music as a subject (Item 1) against how adequate they judge their own university training to have been (Item 4) (Table 1).

Responses to Item 1 are polarised: 47.2% rate music's curricular importance highly (scores 5–6), while 30.6% rate it at the lowest levels (scores 1–2). This mirrors the pattern in Item 4, where 63.9% of respondents rate their own university training as only moderate to low (scores 3–4) — suggesting that current training leaves many future generalist teachers feeling underprepared to use music creatively in class (Table 2).

There is broad agreement on the value of active group singing (Item 5: 61.1% at scores 5–6). Family involvement (Item 2) draws much more hesitant responses, clustering around the neutral score of 3 (38.9%) — future teachers seem to value the idea of family engagement in principle but are unsure how to put it into practice. Folk/popular music (Item 3)

is valued relatively positively (47.2% at scores 5–6), suggesting it is seen as a meaningful tool for cultural identity (Table 3).

This section shows the clearest positive consensus in the survey: 75.0% of participants recognise a strong link between structured music practices and children's mental health (Item 6, scores 5–6), and 61.1% affirm music's efficacy as an anti-bullying and cohesion tool (Item 7, scores 5–6).

Taken together with Theme 1, this points to a mismatch: pre-service teachers strongly acknowledge music's therapeutic and protective potential, yet report entering the profession without the training or confidence to put it into practice.

Qualitative data: musical consumption dynamics

Thematic analysis of the open-ended responses pointed to a strong overlap between the private listening habits of pre-service teachers and the digital media environment of the primary students they will teach (Table 4).

This qualitative matrix points to a generational convergence: the aesthetic preferences of future educators largely mirror those of their primary students, shaped by commercial streaming platforms and algorithmic curation. This shared media consumption is an interesting pedagogical opportunity, but also a risk: because generalist teachers often lack specialised training, they may default to passive digital streaming rather than drawing on a richer, more varied musical heritage (Table 5).

This mapping illustrates how individualised and fragmented aesthetic preferences are among pre-service teachers. This

Table 1: Curricular valuation and institutional training.

Item	1 (Not at all)	2	3	4	5	6 (Extremely)
Item 1 – n	5	6	4	4	9	8
Item 1 – %	13.9%	16.7%	11.1%	11.1%	25.0%	22.2%
Item 4 – n	0	4	12	11	6	3
Item 4 – %	0.0%	11.1%	33.3%	30.6%	16.7%	8.3%

Table 2: Community and curricular elements

Item	1 (Not at all)	2	3	4	5	6 (Extremely)
Item 2 – n	1	4	14	7	7	3
Item 2 – %	2.8%	11.1%	38.9%	19.4%	19.4%	8.3%
Item 3 – n	2	5	6	6	10	7
Item 3 – %	5.6%	13.9%	16.7%	16.7%	27.8%	19.4%
Item 5 – n	4	3	2	5	8	14
Item 5 – %	11.1%	8.3%	5.6%	13.9%	22.2%	38.9%

Table 3: Wellbeing, mental health, and bullying prevention.

Item	1 (Not at all)	2	3	4	5	6 (Extremely)
Item 6 – n	2	2	1	4	11	16
Item 6 – %	5.6%	5.6%	2.8%	11.1%	30.6%	44.4%
Item 7 – n	0	3	3	8	10	12
Item 7 – %	0.0%	8.3%	8.3%	22.2%	27.8%	33.3%

Table 4: Perceived student consumption vs. educator habits (illustrative themes)

Thematic category	Dimension A: Student consumption (practicum observations)	Dimension B: Pre-service educator consumption habits
Algorithmic & commercial dominance	Reggaeton, trap, and mainstream pop dominate peer interactions; students reproduce whatever trends on TikTok and social media, mimicking urban songs popular among older teenagers.	Personal playlists consist almost entirely of pop, reggaeton, and mainstream commercial music; several participants noted listening to “essentially the same urban genres” as their students.
Curricular dissociation vs. cultural drift	In the classroom: simple pedagogical songs enforced by the teacher. Outside: contemporary commercial genres and social-media trends dominate.	Participants report consuming music that was fashionable during their own youth (ages 15–30), often with lyrics they consider not appropriate for a primary classroom.
Aesthetic diversity & professional eclecticism	No equivalent diversity reported among students.	A smaller number of participants described broader listening habits, including classical music for stress relief, and felt teachers should “listen to a bit of everything” to maintain a broad pedagogical repertoire.

Table 5: Aesthetic preferences among participants (selected examples).

Participant	Stated preference	Stated aversion	Interpretive note
P1	Pop	Rock	Relies mainly on mainstream commercial song structures.
P2	Rock	Techno / Heavy Metal	Prefers lower-arousal over highly synthesized, high-arousal styles.
P3	Jazz	Reggaeton	Avoids urban genres, citing explicit lyrical content.
P4	Indie	Trap	Discomfort with heavily commercial urban production.
P5	Regional folk (Valencian/Catalan)	Heavy Metal	Strong orientation toward local heritage and community identity.
P6	Musicals	Rock / Bachata	Prefers narrative-driven, prosocial storytelling.
P7	Rap	Classical Music	Distances from traditional, institutional art-music formats.
P8	Reggaeton	Hardcore Rock	Closely aligned with current youth commercial trends.
P9	Ambient (world/oriental)	Rap	Uses music mainly for personal anxiety reduction.
P10	Metal	Opera	High-arousal preference, distanced from classical styles.
P11	Indie-pop	Mainstream pop	Seeks alternatives outside the dominant mainstream.

diversity can shape classroom practice in different ways — a teacher who avoids classical music (P7) or leans on ambient sound (P9) is likely to build a different sensory and emotional classroom environment than one grounded in regional folklore (P5) or narrative musicals (P6). Without structured training to build shared musical competencies, the use of music as a wellbeing tool remains largely dependent on individual teachers’ personal, unguided tastes.

Integrating the findings: the competency–utility gap

Bringing the quantitative and qualitative findings together points to what we call a competency–utility gap in teacher preparation (Table 6).

This pattern suggests a gap between what higher education conveys about the abstract importance of emotional regulation, social cohesion, and anti-bullying work, and the practical, hands-on musical skills needed to put these ideas into practice. As a result, some pre-service teachers may be left without the confidence to implement music-based interventions themselves, and may default to commercial streaming as a substitute.

Discussion

The competency–utility gap and its implications for wellbeing

That only 47.2% of pre-service primary teachers consider music an important curricular subject is a notable finding. It is consistent with earlier work [20] describing how music tends to

Table 6: The competency–utility gap

Dimension	Key evidence	Implication
1. Perceived wellbeing value (high)	75.0% recognize direct child mental health benefits (Item 6); 61.1% see music as effective against bullying (Item 7).	Strong recognition, in principle, of music as a low-cost, non-pharmacological resource for child wellbeing.
2. Institutional undervaluation (the mismatch)	Only 47.2% consider music an important academic subject (Item 1).	A gap between music’s perceived therapeutic value and its formal curricular status.
3. Limited training (low self-efficacy)	63.9% report only low-to-moderate training adequacy (Item 4); qualitative data show reliance on commercial streaming.	Many pre-service teachers lack the practical tools to translate their positive attitudes into classroom practice.

sit low on generalist teachers’ priorities, often linked to limited early musical training and resulting anxiety, and with more recent evidence that this pattern persists even under curricula that formally require music teaching, both internationally [6] and among pre-service teachers specifically [5].

Read through Ryff’s [3] model, this low valuation may reflect gaps in environmental mastery and self-acceptance: teachers who enter the profession with musical insecurity may be more likely to sideline the subject rather than treat it as a core pedagogical tool. This persists despite a body of neuroscientific and cognitive research pointing to music’s positive associations with spatial–temporal reasoning, working memory, and executive functioning [14–16]. Under-preparing generalist teachers in music may inadvertently reinforce this avoidance, at some cost to their confidence as designers of healthy learning environments.

Within Seligman's [2] PERMA framework, this represents a missed opportunity: treating music as peripheral overlooks its potential to support several dimensions of student flourishing simultaneously — through positive emotion, engagement or flow states [27], social relationships, cultural meaning, and a sense of accomplishment.

Recognising therapeutic value alongside passive consumption

This missed potential is underscored by the finding that 75.0% of participants recognise music's direct benefits for children's mental health, and 61.1% see it as effective against bullying and exclusion. This aligns with de Witte et al.'s [7] meta-analytic work positioning structured musical engagement as a regulator of stress-related outcomes, with more recent evidence specifically on group singing [8] and on music-based interventions for prosocial behaviour among at-risk groups [12], and with Diener's [28] framework linking immediate affect to overall life satisfaction. It is also broadly consistent with Cidade et al. [29], who found that collective musical participation is associated with better community-level quality of life.

At the same time, the gap between recognising music's psychological value and undervaluing it as an academic subject suggests many future teachers see music primarily as a passive, therapeutic leisure activity rather than a structured pedagogical tool. Bridging this gap — helping teachers see music as an active tool for emotional regulation rather than background decoration — is a relevant challenge for teacher training institutions.

The qualitative data add a further layer: the dominance of commercial genres — reggaeton, trap, mainstream pop — driven by algorithmic platforms like TikTok, points to an educational environment strongly shaped by commercial media, alongside a documented decline in traditional singing in primary classrooms [22]. When pre-service teachers and young students share very similar, commercially shaped listening habits, teachers may be less able to act as guides into a wider range of musical styles, which can sideline folk and traditional music [19] — itself a resource for preserving intangible cultural heritage and culturally grounded wellbeing.

Methodological limitations and future directions

These findings should be read within clear methodological limits. The sample (N=36) is modest and drawn from a single institution in Eastern Spain, which limits statistical generalizability [24]. This is consistent with more recent methodological guidance noting that small, single-site samples are appropriate for descriptive, exploratory mapping of an issue, but not for building or testing explanatory theory, which requires larger, more diverse samples [25]. These results are best treated as exploratory, diagnostic indicators rather than definitive national or European profiles.

To build on this exploratory work, future research should move toward larger, multi-institutional designs — ideally a randomised controlled trial with a substantially larger sample

across multiple European centres, using validated psychometric instruments to track changes in student anxiety, and where feasible, biological markers such as salivary cortisol, alongside social cohesion measures and musical variables. Evidence of this kind would provide a stronger basis for informing teacher-preparation curricula and educational policy.

Conclusions

This study set out to examine how pre-service primary teachers, shortly after completing their school practicum, perceive the role of music in supporting classroom wellbeing, family engagement, and anti-bullying practice, and how this perception compares with their own sense of preparedness to deliver it. We hypothesised that participants would report a favourable view of music's contribution to children's mental health and to reducing bullying, while reporting comparatively low confidence in their own university training — producing a gap between the perceived value of music and teachers' practical readiness to use it.

The findings support this hypothesis. Three-quarters of participants recognised a strong link between structured music practices and children's mental health, and just over sixty per cent affirmed music's value as an anti-bullying and cohesion tool. At the same time, only 47.2% considered music an important curricular subject, and nearly two-thirds rated their own university training as only moderate to low. This pattern — strong recognition of music's therapeutic potential alongside limited confidence to use it — was consistent across both the quantitative and qualitative data: participants described relying heavily on commercial streaming platforms, sharing musical tastes strikingly similar to those of their own students, rather than drawing on a broader or more traditional musical repertoire. Family involvement in musical activities drew hesitant, largely neutral responses, suggesting this remains an underdeveloped avenue in current teacher preparation.

These results point to a specific and addressable gap in higher education: it is not that pre-service teachers undervalue music's contribution to children's wellbeing, but that current training does not equip them with the practical competence and confidence to act on that recognition. Addressing this would likely require teacher training curricula to move beyond treating music as a purely recreational subject, toward structured, hands-on modules that build genuine musical competence, alongside more deliberate attention to family-school musical engagement and to preserving folk and traditional music as a cultural and pedagogical resource. Given the study's modest, single-institution sample, these conclusions should be read as exploratory: they offer a diagnostic basis for future, larger-scale research rather than definitive claims, but they point to a concrete, practical direction for strengthening how music is taught to those who will go on to teach it to children.

(Annex-A&B)

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