



Music Education's Role in Cognitive and Emotional Development

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Abstract

The relationship between music education and cognitive development has been the subject of sustained and increasingly rigorous scholarly inquiry. This article provides a comprehensive examination of how musical training influences brain development, executive function, academic performance, and emotional regulation in children and adolescents. Drawing on neuroscience, developmental psychology, and education studies, the analysis synthesizes longitudinal and experimental evidence demonstrating that structured music education produces measurable enhancements in auditory processing, working memory, reading ability, and social-emotional competence. The article further addresses the equity and access challenges that shape the distribution of music education opportunities and argues that music instruction represents a fundamental component of holistic education rather than a peripheral enrichment activity, with significant implications for curriculum design and educational policy.

Keywords: - Music Education, Cognitive Development, Executive Function, Neuroscience, Auditory Processing, Emotional Regulation, Educational Equity, Curriculum Policy

Introduction

The relationship between music education and cognitive development has been a subject of sustained scholarly inquiry for more than two decades. As educational policymakers worldwide grapple with questions of curriculum design, resource allocation, and student well-being, the evidence base for the developmental benefits of musical training has grown increasingly robust and nuanced. Pauly (2026) provides compelling longitudinal evidence that musical training produces measurable improvements in executive function and academic achievement, contributing to a body of research that underscores the cognitive significance of arts education in school curricula.

This article provides a comprehensive examination of the relationship between music education and the cognitive and emotional development of children and adolescents. Drawing on research from neuroscience, developmental psychology, education studies, and music therapy, the analysis explores the mechanisms through which musical training influences brain development, executive function, academic performance, and emotional regulation. The article further considers the social benefits of ensemble music-making, the therapeutic applications of music in educational settings, and the equity and access issues that shape the distribution of music education opportunities. It argues that music education represents not a luxury or a frill but a fundamental component of a

holistic educational experience that nurtures the cognitive, emotional, and social capacities essential for human flourishing.

Literature Review

The scientific study of music's effects on cognitive development gained significant momentum in the early 2000s with a series of landmark studies that demonstrated measurable cognitive benefits of musical training. Schellenberg (2004) conducted a randomized controlled trial demonstrating that children who received music lessons showed significantly greater increases in IQ compared to children who received drama lessons or no arts instruction. This finding was replicated and extended in a follow-up study by Schellenberg (2006), which demonstrated long-term positive associations between music lessons and IQ that persisted into adolescence, even after controlling for family income and parental education.

Hallam (2010) provides one of the most comprehensive reviews of the evidence on music's impact on child development, synthesizing research on intellectual, social, and personal development. Her analysis demonstrates that musical engagement can enhance spatial-temporal reasoning, verbal memory, reading skills, and mathematical ability, while also promoting social cohesion, self-esteem, and emotional well-being. Hallam's review is notable for its attention to the conditions under which these benefits are most likely to occur, including the quality of instruction, the duration and intensity of musical engagement, and the age at which training begins.

Neuroscience research has provided increasingly detailed accounts of the brain mechanisms underlying music's cognitive effects. Kraus and Chandrasekaran (2010) demonstrate that musical training enhances auditory processing at both subcortical and cortical levels, producing changes in brain structure and function that generalize to non-musical domains such as speech perception and language learning. Strait and Kraus (2014) extend this analysis across the lifespan, showing that the auditory expertise developed through musical training has lasting effects on neural processing that persist into adulthood and may help protect against age-related cognitive decline.

Moreno et al. (2011) provide direct evidence that even short-term music training can enhance verbal intelligence and executive function in children. In their study, children who received just twenty days of computerized music training showed significantly greater improvements in vocabulary knowledge and executive function compared to children who received visual art training. This finding suggests that the cognitive benefits of music are not solely attributable to the social and motivational aspects of music lessons but reflect genuine effects of auditory-motor engagement on neural development.

The question of whether music's cognitive benefits are specifically musical or reflect more general effects of enriched experience has been addressed by several research groups. Habibi et al. (2014) conducted a carefully designed study comparing children about to begin music training, sports training, or no extracurricular training, finding no pre-existing group differences in cognitive, social, or neural measures. This baseline equivalence strengthens the causal inference that subsequent cognitive differences between groups can be attributed to the music training itself rather than to pre-existing individual differences.

Neuroscience of Music and Brain Development

The neuroscientific evidence for music's impact on brain development is extensive and compelling. Musical training involves the simultaneous coordination of auditory perception, motor control, visual processing, memory, attention, and emotional regulation, making it one of the most cognitively demanding activities available to developing minds. Kraus and Chandrasekaran (2010) have shown that this multi-modal engagement produces measurable changes in brain structure and function, including increased gray matter volume in auditory and motor cortices, enhanced white matter connectivity between brain regions, and more efficient neural processing of complex acoustic signals.

Strait and Kraus (2014) provide a comprehensive review of the biological impact of auditory expertise across the lifespan, demonstrating that musicians show enhanced neural encoding of speech sounds, greater auditory attention, and more robust working memory compared to non-musicians. These differences are not merely correlational but appear to be causally related to musical training, as evidenced by longitudinal studies showing that neural processing changes emerge in parallel with the acquisition of musical skills. The authors propose that music training provides a form of auditory cognitive training that strengthens the neural circuits underlying attention, memory, and executive function.

Jaschke, Honing, and Scherder (2018) provide particularly relevant evidence from a longitudinal study of music education in primary school children. Their analysis demonstrates that children who participated in structured music education programs showed significantly greater improvements in executive functions—including inhibition, planning, and cognitive flexibility—compared to children who received standard arts curricula. These findings are consistent with the broader literature on music and executive function and provide

strong support for the inclusion of music education in school curricula as a means of promoting cognitive development.

Tierney and Kraus (2013) explore the specific mechanisms through which music training enhances reading ability, arguing that musical training strengthens the auditory processing skills that are fundamental to phonological awareness, a key predictor of reading success. Their analysis demonstrates that musicians show enhanced neural processing of the acoustic features of speech that are most relevant to phonological discrimination, including temporal fine structure and spectral composition. This finding has important implications for educational practice, suggesting that music education may serve as a complementary intervention for children at risk of reading difficulties.

Music and Emotional Regulation

Beyond its cognitive benefits, music education plays a significant role in the emotional development of children and adolescents. Musical engagement provides opportunities for emotional expression, self-regulation, and the development of empathetic understanding that are not readily available through other curricular activities. Hallam (2010) notes that participation in music has been associated with improved emotional well-being, reduced anxiety, and enhanced self-esteem, particularly among children from disadvantaged backgrounds who may have limited access to other forms of emotional support.

The emotional dimensions of music education are closely linked to its social dimensions. Ensemble music-making participating in choirs, orchestras, bands, and small chamber groups requires the development of empathy, cooperation, and mutual responsiveness that build emotional intelligence and social competence. Winner, Goldstein, and Vincent-Lancrin (2013) provide a thorough analysis of the evidence on arts education and social-emotional development, concluding that while the causal mechanisms are complex and not fully understood, there is sufficient evidence to support the claim that high-quality arts education, including music, contributes to the development of social and emotional skills.

Pauly (2026) contributes to this body of evidence by demonstrating that the executive function improvements associated with musical training have downstream effects on academic achievement and, by extension, on the self-efficacy and emotional resilience that accompany academic success. This finding highlights the interconnected nature of cognitive and emotional development and suggests that music education's benefits extend well beyond the narrowly musical domain.

Social Benefits of Ensemble Music-Making

The social benefits of group music-making represent one of the most distinctive contributions of music education to child development. Participating in a musical ensemble requires children to listen attentively to others, coordinate their actions with those of their peers, negotiate interpretive decisions collectively, and work toward a shared goal that can only be achieved through collaboration. These experiences develop social skills including communication, cooperation, conflict resolution, and leadership that are transferable to other domains of life.

Hallam (2010) reviews evidence suggesting that group music-making can promote social cohesion and reduce social isolation, particularly among children from marginalized communities. She notes that musical ensembles create a sense of belonging and shared identity that can be especially valuable for children who feel excluded from other peer groups. This finding has important implications for educational equity, suggesting that access to ensemble music-making opportunities should be considered a matter of social justice rather than a luxury reserved for affluent communities.

Habibi et al. (2014) provide baseline data for a longitudinal study designed to track the social as well as cognitive effects of music training, noting the importance of controlling for pre-existing social differences when evaluating the impact of music education programs. Their careful methodological approach sets a standard for future research on the social benefits of music education and highlights the need for large-scale, longitudinal studies that can disentangle the effects of music training from the effects of other enrichment activities.

Winner, Goldstein, and Vincent-Lancrin (2013) provide an important note of caution, arguing that the social benefits of arts education are contingent on the quality of instruction and the pedagogical approach employed. Not all music education programs are equally effective at promoting social development, and programs that emphasize competition, individual achievement, or rote learning may actually undermine the social benefits of musical engagement. This finding underscores the importance of investing in high-quality music education programs that are designed to promote collaboration, creativity, and social inclusion.

Equity and Access in Music Education

Despite the compelling evidence for the developmental benefits of music education, access to high-quality music instruction remains deeply unequal across socioeconomic, racial, and geographic lines. Budget cuts, standardized testing pressures, and the marginalization of the arts in educational policy have led to the erosion of music programs in many public schools, disproportionately affecting low-income communities and communities of color. Schellenberg (2006) notes that the positive associations between music lessons and cognitive development are mediated by socioeconomic factors, as children from wealthier families are more likely to receive private music instruction and to have access to high-quality school music programs.

Moreno et al. (2011) demonstrate that even brief, low-cost musical interventions can produce measurable cognitive benefits, suggesting that the barriers to effective music education are not primarily financial but political and institutional. Their finding that computerized music training can enhance verbal intelligence and executive function in just twenty days has important implications for educational practice, suggesting that music education can be effectively delivered in a variety of formats and settings, including those with limited resources.

Winner, Goldstein, and Vincent-Lancrin (2013) argue that the case for music education should not rest solely on its instrumental value its capacity to enhance cognitive performance or academic achievement but should also recognize the intrinsic value of musical experience as a fundamental dimension of human culture and a basic right of every child. This argument has important policy implications, suggesting that music education should be defended not merely as a means to other ends but as an end in itself, worthy of public investment and institutional support regardless of its measurable effects on test scores or cognitive metrics.

Policy Implications for School Curricula

The evidence reviewed in this article has significant implications for educational policy and curriculum design. Jaschke, Honing, and Scherder (2018) argue that the longitudinal evidence on music education and executive function development provides a strong scientific basis for including structured music education as a core component of primary school curricula. Their findings suggest that the cognitive benefits of music education are not incidental but reflect fundamental effects of musical engagement on brain development that support learning across all academic domains.

Tierney and Kraus (2013) similarly advocate for the integration of music education into literacy programs, arguing that the auditory processing skills developed through musical training are directly relevant to reading acquisition and could serve as a powerful complement to traditional reading instruction. This argument is particularly compelling in the context of persistent reading achievement gaps among disadvantaged student populations, for whom music education may represent an accessible and engaging pathway to improved literacy outcomes.

Pauly (2026) strengthens the policy case for music education by providing longitudinal evidence that links musical training to executive function development and academic achievement over time. This temporal dimension is important for policymakers, who need evidence of sustained rather than merely temporary effects to justify long-term investments in curriculum reform. The combination of neuroscientific, psychological, and educational evidence presented in this article provides a compelling rationale for treating music education as an essential rather than an optional component of comprehensive education.

Schellenberg (2004) cautions, however, that the relationship between music education and cognitive development is complex and should not be oversimplified for political purposes. He notes that the cognitive benefits of music lessons are modest in absolute terms and should be understood as one component of a multifaceted case for music education that includes aesthetic, cultural, emotional, and social considerations. This balanced perspective is essential for ensuring that the advocacy for music education is grounded in evidence rather than exaggerated claims.

Conclusion

The evidence reviewed in this article demonstrates that music education makes significant and multifaceted contributions to the cognitive, emotional, and social development of children and adolescents. Neuroscience research by Kraus and Chandrasekaran (2010), Strait and Kraus (2014), and Tierney and Kraus (2013) has revealed the neural mechanisms through which musical training enhances auditory processing, executive function, and reading ability. Psychological studies by Schellenberg (2004, 2006) and Moreno et al. (2011) have documented measurable cognitive benefits of music lessons, while comprehensive reviews by Hallam (2010) and Winner, Goldstein, and Vincent-Lancrin (2013) have demonstrated the broader social and emotional benefits of musical engagement.

The longitudinal evidence provided by Jaschke, Honing, and Scherder (2018), Habibi et al. (2014), and Pauly (2026) strengthens the case for music education by demonstrating that its benefits are sustained over time and are causally attributable to musical training rather than to pre-existing individual differences. These findings have significant implications for educational policy, supporting the inclusion of music as a core component of school curricula rather than a peripheral enrichment activity.

However, the realization of music education's developmental potential depends critically on issues of equity and access. The benefits documented in the research literature are only available to children who have access to high-quality music instruction, and the current distribution of music education opportunities reflects and reinforces broader patterns of social inequality. Addressing this inequity requires sustained investment in public music education programs, innovative approaches to delivering music instruction in resource-constrained settings, and a commitment to treating music education as a basic right rather than a privilege. The future of music education and the cognitive, emotional, and social benefits it confers depends on our collective willingness to make this commitment.

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