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The Sound of Belonging: Exploring Engaging Education Through Music Teacher Training

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Abstract: Engagement is increasingly understood not merely as a cognitive-motivational construct but as an intrinsically social and affective dimension of learning, shaped by educational relationships, classroom climate and sense of belonging across in-person, hybrid and digital settings. Collective music-making, which interweaves body, voice, emotion and relationship, may constitute a privileged arena for engaging education. This study explores how prospective music teachers perceive the socio-affective dimensions of engagement in music education. An exploratory mixed-methods study involved 133 trainees enrolled in the A030 qualification pathway (Music in lower and upper secondary schools) at the Conservatory of Pescara, Italy, within a course in General and Social Pedagogy that alternated theoretical reflection with active music-making workshops. Data was collected through an anonymous semi-structured questionnaire and analyzed through descriptive statistics and thematic analysis. Trainees attributed a central role to educational relationship and classroom climate, associated sense of belonging with choral and ensemble practices, and emphasised positive emotions as drivers of motivation and wellbeing; by contrast, awareness of co-regulation strategies in hybrid and digital settings proved limited. Collective music-making emerges as a pedagogical device for cultivating engaging-education competences, while initial teacher training should strengthen co-regulation beyond physical co-presence.

Keywords: engaging education; music education; socio-affective engagement; teacher training; sense of belonging

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1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, research on student engagement has progressively broadened its conceptual boundaries. The influential synthesis by Fredricks, Blumenfeld and Paris (2004) described engagement as a multidimensional meta-construct comprising behavioral, emotional and cognitive components, and invited scholars to study these dimensions in their dynamic interplay rather than in isolation. Subsequent work has increasingly foregrounded a fourth, social dimension, recognising that involvement in learning is inseparable from the quality of the relationships through which knowledge is co-constructed. Engagement, in this perspective, is no longer a merely individual disposition to be measured, but a relational and affective condition that emerges within educational communities.

This shift has acquired urgency in the contemporary media ecosystem. Formal, non-formal and informal educational contexts are increasingly hybrid, and learning unfolds across physical classrooms, online platforms and blended arrangements whose

pedagogical implications are still being clarified (Bonaiuti & Dipace, 2021; Dipace et al., 2024). Within this landscape, the Engaging Education perspective calls upon schools, conservatories and teacher-training institutions to design spaces in which cognitive, emotional and social involvement becomes the driving force of authentic learning, active participation and genuine learner agency. Research on classroom interactions has consistently shown that the quality of teacher–student relationships is a foundational condition for engagement (Pianta et al., 2012), while the psychological sense of school membership, that is, the experience of being accepted, respected and supported within a learning community, has long been associated with motivation and participation (Goodenow, 1993). Equally relevant is the notion of co-regulation, understood as the reciprocal, moment-to-moment adjustment of emotional states between interacting partners (Butler & Randall, 2013), which offers a fruitful lens for observing how groups sustain attention, emotion and shared purpose over time.

Music education occupies a distinctive position within this debate. Making music together, singing in a choir, playing in an ensemble, improvising, listening and composing collectively, is by its very nature an experience that interweaves body, voice, emotion and relationship. Conceiving music as an activity rather than an object, *musicking* in Small's (1998) terms, draws attention to the social relationships that musical performance enacts and makes visible. Empirical studies support this view: joint music-making has been shown to promote spontaneous cooperative and prosocial behavior in young children (Kirschner & Tomasello, 2010), and interpersonal synchronisation in music and dance appears to foster social bonding through both psychological and neurohormonal mechanisms (Tarr et al., 2014). Research on singing has similarly documented its contribution to social inclusion and to children's sense of self (Welch et al., 2014), and a comprehensive review of the evidence confirms the wide-ranging benefits of active engagement with music for personal, social and emotional development (Hallam & Himonides, 2022).

Italian music-pedagogical scholarship has proposed a bio-educational reading of sonic experience that holds together its biological, affective and didactic dimensions (Ciasullo, 2015). Within this perspective, voice and instrumental gesture are not merely techniques to be acquired, but languages through which relationships with others are built, emotion is regulated and the classroom community is inhabited. This reading resonates with wider evidence on the inclusive value of shared embodied and workshop-based practices, which activate empathy and cooperative coordination through movement and rhythm alike (Guerriero et al., 2025), and with the community music tradition, which conceives the music educator as a facilitator of participation and hospitality (Higgins, 2012; Coppi, 2017). Music teaching may therefore be regarded as a privileged laboratory for socio-affective experimentation, capable of simultaneously activating the cognitive, behavioral, emotional and social dimensions of engagement.

Yet the extent to which future music teachers are prepared to recognise, design and sustain these dimensions remains largely unexplored, particularly in relation to the hybrid and digital settings that increasingly characterise contemporary music education, from audio-sharing platforms and remote ensemble rehearsals to digital notation, performance tools and generative technologies (Coppi, 2024). Initial teacher training is the place in which such competences can be intentionally cultivated, provided that it offers pedagogical frameworks for the co-construction of inclusive learning contexts (Amatori, 2019) and a vocabulary capable of naming participation and belonging with precision (Amatori & De Mutiis, 2023).

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Against this background, the present study investigates how prospective secondary-school music teachers perceive the socio-affective dimensions of engagement in music education. Three research questions guided the inquiry: (RQ1) What role do trainees attribute to educational relationship and classroom climate in fostering student engagement? (RQ2) How do they perceive the contribution of collective musical practices to sense of belonging and to emotional experience? (RQ3) To what extent are they aware of strategies for sustaining relational climate and co-regulation in hybrid and digital settings? The main aim of the contribution is to provide a first, descriptive account of these perceptions in order to inform the design of initial teacher-training pathways.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Context and Participants

The study was conducted within the A030 qualification pathway, Music in lower and upper secondary schools, established at the Conservatory of Pescara, Italy, in the academic year 2025/2026. Participants were the 133 trainees who attended the course in General and Social Pedagogy taught by the author. Participation in the survey was voluntary. The sample is therefore a convenience sample, consistent with the exploratory aim of the study. Participants' characteristics (age, academic status, gender and musical specialisation) are summarised in Section 3.1.

2.2. The Training Pathway

The course alternated theoretical reflection with active music-making workshops. The theoretical component addressed the categories of Engaging Education and the pedagogical frameworks that sustain the co-construction of inclusive learning contexts (Amatori, 2019), with particular emphasis on developing an inclusion-aware pedagogical vocabulary (Amatori & De Mutiis, 2023), on emotional literacy as a lifelong educational task (Buccolo, 2013) and on the design of didactic actions explicitly oriented towards inclusion and wellbeing (Buccolo et al., 2021). The workshop component engaged trainees in choral practice, ensemble music-making, rhythmic and body-based activities, collective improvisation and participatory listening. After each workshop, trainees were invited to reflect on the relational and emotional dynamics they had experienced and to transpose them into instructional designs for their future classrooms. This alternation between experience and reflection was informed by a methodological sensitivity to teaching routines as sedimented, reflective professional practice (Vinci, 2011).

2.3. Instrument

Data were collected through a semi-structured questionnaire administered anonymously at the end of the course. The instrument comprised three sections. The first gathered biographical and professional information. The second focused on the socio-affective dimensions of engagement (educational relationship, classroom climate, sense of belonging, participation, emotion, empathy, wellbeing and co-regulation) through 18 closed-ended items rated on a five-point Likert scale; a subset of items specifically addressed how these dimensions are declined across in-person, hybrid and digital settings. The design of this section drew on approaches to reading classroom climate that combine human and technology-assisted perception of group dynamics (Basta & di Padova, 2025). The third section consisted of open-ended items designed to

gather trainees' narratives concerning the workshop activities undertaken and the strategies they would adopt in their own teaching.

2.4. Data Analysis

The study adopted a convergent mixed-methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018), in which quantitative and qualitative strands were collected simultaneously, analysed separately and then integrated at the interpretation stage. This design was considered appropriate for an exploratory inquiry into perceptions that are at once measurable in their general orientation and irreducibly subjective in their meaning. It allowed the breadth of the questionnaire data to be complemented by the depth of trainees' own accounts of their workshop experience. Closed-ended responses were subjected to descriptive statistical analysis (frequencies, percentages, means and standard deviations), with the aim of outlining the overall distribution of trainees' perceptions across the socio-affective dimensions of engagement and across in-person, hybrid and digital settings. Responses to open-ended items were examined through reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), following the phases of familiarisation, initial coding, theme generation, review, definition and reporting. Each response was repeatedly and segmented into units of meaning. These units were then coded and progressively clustered into broader themes, which were refined through constant comparison with the data set as a whole. Coding was conducted inductively, while remaining sensitive to the theoretical categories of engagement outlined in the Introduction. This approach is consistent with previous research on music teachers' perspectives, where inductive analysis of participants' accounts has proved effective in capturing the strategies, difficulties and benefits experienced in both face-to-face and remote music teaching (Biasutti et al., 2022, 2023). For each theme, the number of respondents whose answers contributed to it was recorded, so that the qualitative findings could be read alongside the quantitative indicators. In the integration phase, the two strands were compared to identify areas of convergence, complementarity and divergence. Their joint presentation is summarised in Table 1.

2.5. Ethical Considerations

Participation was voluntary and anonymous, and no personal identifying data were collected. Trainees were informed of the aims of the study and of the exclusively scientific use of the data, in accordance with the European General Data Protection Regulation (EU 2016/679).

3. Results

The results presented below are preliminary and descriptive in nature. They are organised according to the three research questions, integrating quantitative indicators with the themes generated through the analysis of open-ended responses (Table 1).

3.1. Participants

The 133 respondents were aged between 18 and 40 years. All of them were either enrolled in a second-level academic diploma programme (*Diploma Accademico di II livello*) or had already completed it, and therefore entered the qualification pathway with an advanced level of musical training. The sample comprised 73 women (54.9%) and 60 men (45.1%). With regard to musical specialisation, approximately one third of the participants came from voice programmes, one third from string instrument

programmes and one third from keyboard and percussion programmes, while the remaining participants came from wind instrument programmes. The sample thus reflects a balanced variety of musical backgrounds, which allowed the perceptions of singers, ensemble instrumentalists and keyboard players, whose everyday practice involves different degrees of collective music-making, to be compared within the same training pathway.

3.2. Educational Relationship and Classroom Climate

Nearly all trainees (92%) attributed a central role to the quality of the educational relationship and to classroom climate as foundational conditions for student engagement and participation. In the open-ended responses, the relationship between teacher and students was frequently described as the precondition for any meaningful musical activity, and classroom climate as something that the teacher must actively build and protect rather than take for granted.

3.3. Collective Music-Making and Sense of Belonging

Sense of belonging to a learning community was recognised as particularly salient in relation to collective musical practices (89%), namely choir, instrumental ensemble and ensemble workshops. Trainees described the experience of sounding together as a moment in which the group becomes perceptible to itself. A recurrent theme concerned the idea that sonic synchronisation facilitates, even before verbal language, the construction of group bonds and the shared regulation of emotion: breathing together, keeping a common pulse and listening to one another were described as ways of feeling part of something larger than oneself.

3.4. Positive Emotions and Wellbeing

With regard to the more specifically emotional dimension, trainees emphasised the role of positive emotions, namely pleasure, enthusiasm, sense of competence and pride in shared performance, in sustaining student motivation and wellbeing (87%). Several respondents argued that making music together offers a context for emotional expression and recognition that is difficult to replicate with comparable intensity in other disciplines, and that the teacher's task is to design activities in which every student can experience success within the group.

3.5. Co-Regulation in Hybrid and Digital Settings

By contrast, explicit awareness of co-regulation strategies applicable in digital and hybrid settings proved more limited. Only a minority of trainees (22%) were able to indicate specific strategies for sustaining relational climate, reciprocal listening and group synchronisation when musical practice moves, even partially, beyond physical co-presence. When such strategies were mentioned, they mainly concerned Debate, Flipped Classroom, TBL, Cooperative distance learning. Many responses expressed doubt as to whether the relational qualities of ensemble practice could be preserved in remote settings at all.

Table 1. Main themes generated from the thematic analysis of open-ended responses.

Theme	Description	Respondents (n, %)
Relationship as precondition	The educational relationship and classroom climate are seen as the foundation of engagement	98 %

	and participation	
Sounding together, belonging together	Choral and ensemble practices make the group perceptible and foster sense of belonging before words	99 %
The joy of shared performance	Pleasure, enthusiasm, competence and pride sustain motivation and wellbeing	98 %
Fragile presence at a distance	Uncertainty about sustaining listening, synchronisation and climate in hybrid and digital settings	45 %

Note. Themes are not mutually exclusive; percentages refer to the 133 respondents.

4. Discussion

The findings, while preliminary, delineate a coherent picture in which collective music-making emerges as a privileged driver of socio-affective engagement. With respect to RQ1, the centrality that trainees attribute to relationship and classroom climate echoes established evidence on the role of teacher–student interactions in sustaining engagement (Pianta et al., 2012). It is noteworthy that future music teachers, whose prior training is predominantly oriented towards instrumental and vocal performance, spontaneously identify the relational dimension as the foundation of their professional role. This suggests that the course succeeded in making visible a dimension of teaching that conservatory curricula often leave implicit.

With respect to RQ2, the association between collective practices and sense of belonging is consistent with research on music and social bonding (Kirschner & Tomasello, 2010; Tarr et al., 2014). The trainees' intuition that sonic synchronisation builds group bonds before verbal language does so is particularly significant from a pedagogical perspective, since it points to music as a resource for participation that does not depend on linguistic or academic proficiency, and therefore as a powerful lever for inclusion (Welch et al., 2014; Hallam & Himonides, 2022). The emphasis on positive emotions confirms that making music together constitutes a natural context for emotional literacy (Buccolo, 2013), one that nonetheless calls for didactic actions explicitly designed around inclusion and wellbeing (Buccolo et al., 2021), lest the same practices that generate pride for some students produce exposure and anxiety for others.

The findings related to RQ3 indicate the most significant area for development. The limited awareness of co-regulation strategies beyond physical co-presence signals a gap between the increasingly hybrid reality of music education and the relational competences that future teachers feel able to deploy. This gap invites dialogue with research exploring how immersive and social technologies may extend empathic engagement without displacing human relationship: through virtual reality applied to empathy-centred training (Zarrilli Affaitati et al., 2024), through social robots designed to support relational and imitative learning (Pavone Salafia, 2024), or through digital-twin and design-oriented approaches that reframe how learners access and interact with cultural and sonic heritage (Di Tore et al., 2023). The point is not to transfer ensemble practice online unchanged, but to help teachers identify which conditions of co-regulation, such as shared pulse, visual cues, turn-taking and mutual listening, can be intentionally designed in hybrid environments (Bonaiuti & Dipace, 2021; Coppi, 2024).

These considerations suggest that initial training should offer explicit and structured models for transferring the relational and cooperative qualities of ensemble

practice to hybrid settings. Two approaches appear particularly promising. Team-Based Learning (TBL) organises learning around stable teams, individual and team readiness assurance and application tasks that require collective decisions (Michaelsen et al., 2004). Transposed to music education, it could structure remote ensemble work around shared interpretive problems, such as choosing tempi, balancing parts or arranging a piece, making mutual accountability and interdependence visible even when musicians do not share the same room. Cooperative distance learning, grounded in social interdependence theory, relies on positive interdependence, individual accountability, promotive interaction and group processing (Johnson & Johnson, 2009). In online music settings, these principles can be operationalised through role assignment (section leader, timekeeper, critical listener), the asynchronous layering of recorded parts on shared audio platforms and structured peer-feedback sessions. Both models shift the focus from simultaneous sounding, often hindered by network latency, to the shared construction of musical meaning, thereby offering concrete routes for co-regulation beyond physical co-presence.

Taken together, the results suggest that music teaching, precisely by virtue of its choral and cooperative nature, may constitute a pedagogical device for cultivating the competences of engaging education in concrete terms: active listening as a premise for empathy, rhythmic synchronisation as an exercise in co-regulation, shared performance as a construction of belonging. For initial teacher training, this implies integrating relational, empathic and regulatory competences with the specificity of sonic and choral language and doing so through pathways that alternate lived musical experience with structured reflection, as the course examined here attempted to do.

Several limitations must be acknowledged. The study relies on self-reported perceptions collected at a single point in time, without a pre-test or a comparison group, and therefore cannot document changes attributable to the course. The sample, although sizeable for a single pathway, was drawn from one institution and may not represent the broader population of prospective music teachers. Finally, the dual role of the author as course instructor and researcher may have influenced responses, despite the anonymity of the questionnaire. Future research should adopt longitudinal and multi-site designs, include observational data from trainees' teaching practice and examine the effectiveness of specific training modules on co-regulation in hybrid music education.

5. Conclusions

The A030 pathway at the Conservatory of Pescara constitutes a significant case study for interrogating, within an engaging-education perspective, the relationship between musical practice, educational relationship and socio-affective engagement. Prospective music teachers recognise the relational and emotional dimension of musical learning as central and identify in collective music-making a privileged means of building belonging and sustaining wellbeing. At the same time, their limited awareness of co-regulation strategies in hybrid and digital settings indicates a clear priority for the design of initial teacher-training pathways. Cultivating teachers able to make a class sound together, in the room as well as at a distance, means equipping them to transform the experience of music into an experience of belonging.

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