

# Creative Learning Methods through Music, Dance, and Theatrical Expression in Education

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.1026EDU0183>

Received: 22 March 2026; Accepted: 27 March 2026; Published: 10 April 2026

## ABSTRACT

The integration of creative learning methods through music, dance, and theatrical expression has gained increasing attention as a pedagogical approach that supports interdisciplinary, inclusive, and emotionally meaningful education. This study examines how arts-based practices can be systematically embedded in secondary education to foster creativity, collaboration, empathy, and identity formation. The article is informed by sociocultural and aesthetic theories of learning, particularly the work of Vygotsky and Eisner, as well as contemporary perspectives on embodied and inclusive pedagogy.

Adopting a qualitative, interpretive research design grounded in Arts-Based Educational Research (ABER), the study draws on classroom observations, teacher reflections, student-produced materials, and guided interviews conducted in four culturally diverse lower secondary schools in Greece. The analysis focused on recurring patterns related to emotional engagement, peer interaction, multimodal participation, and inclusive learning.

The findings indicate that music, dance, and drama can function not only as artistic forms of expression but also as pedagogical tools that promote student agency, social connectedness, and alternative pathways to understanding curricular content. Teachers reported that arts-based activities supported the participation of students with diverse linguistic, cognitive, and emotional profiles, while also reshaping their own professional identities toward more reflective and facilitative roles. At the same time, the study identifies important challenges, including curricular rigidity, limited teacher preparation, assessment difficulties, and uneven institutional support.

The article argues that the educational value of the arts lies in their capacity to connect cognition, emotion, embodiment, and inclusion within a shared learning process. It concludes that sustained policy support, structured professional development, and stronger institutional recognition are necessary if arts-based pedagogy is to become an integral rather than peripheral dimension of contemporary democratic education.

**Keywords:** Creative learning, Arts integration, Music pedagogy, Embodied education, Dance and movement, Drama in education, Emotional intelligence, Inclusive teaching, Teacher agency, Educational policy

## INTRODUCTION

In contemporary educational landscapes, where standardization and measurable academic performance dominate, there is a growing imperative to reframe learning as a holistic, embodied, and creative process. Artistic expression, through music, dance, and theatrical performance, offers unique epistemological and affective dimensions that transcend linguistic or purely cognitive modalities. As Eisner (2002) argues, the arts are not ornamental but constitute vital forms of knowing, shaping perception, sensitivity, and emotional resonance.

This study explores how creative methods involving music, movement, and dramatic expression can substantively enrich educational practice by fostering emotional intelligence, empathy, and collaborative engagement. Grounded in socio-cultural learning theory (Vygotsky, 1978) and the concept of kinesthetic

learning intelligence (Gardner, 1999), the research frames artistic modalities not as supplemental, but as integral to inclusive and transformative pedagogy.

Situated within ongoing efforts to reimagine education beyond traditional forms of instruction, this study brings together theoretical synthesis, classroom research, and educator testimonies to show how arts integration enables learners to connect on cognitive, emotional, and social levels. Moreover, it investigates how such practices reshape teacher identity and align with contemporary policy agendas promoting equity, interdisciplinary learning, and creativity. Ultimately, the study advocates for embedding embodied creative practices into the curriculum as catalysts for participatory, reflective, and future-oriented education.

Although the educational value of music, dance, and theatrical expression has been widely acknowledged, much of the literature still emphasizes theoretical advocacy over detailed discussion of implementation in formal school settings. In particular, fewer studies bring together the pedagogical benefits of arts-based learning with the practical constraints that shape its adoption in contemporary secondary education. Against this background, the present study explores how creative learning methods grounded in music, movement, and theatrical expression can support inclusive and interdisciplinary teaching, while also examining the conditions, challenges, and institutional demands associated with their implementation. In doing so, the article seeks to contribute a more practice-oriented and critically balanced account of arts-based pedagogy in secondary education.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **Theoretical Orientation**

The present study is informed by a multidimensional theoretical framework that draws on sociocultural, aesthetic, and embodied conceptions of learning. Within this perspective, the arts are understood not as supplementary classroom activities but as legitimate pedagogical modes through which students engage cognitively, emotionally, socially, and culturally.

Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory provides an important foundation by framing learning as a socially mediated process in which symbolic tools, including language, performance, and artistic expression, play a central role in cognitive development. Similarly, Dewey (1934) conceptualized art as a central component of human experience, arguing that aesthetic engagement promotes reflective thought and connects knowing with doing. Eisner (2002) further emphasized the arts as modes of inquiry and meaning-making through which learners develop perception, imagination, and reflective judgment.

The study also draws on Gardner's (1999) notion of multiple intelligences, particularly musical and bodily-kinesthetic intelligence, which broadened educational understandings of cognition beyond linguistic and logical forms of achievement. In parallel, Greene (1995) added a critical and emancipatory dimension by presenting the arts as a means of cultivating social imagination, agency, and openness to alternative possibilities. These theoretical contributions are complemented by perspectives on embodied cognition, including the work of Merleau-Ponty (1962) and Sheets-Johnstone (2011), both of whom challenge the separation of mind and body in educational experience and provide a philosophical rationale for incorporating movement, gesture, and performance into pedagogical practice.

### **Contemporary Developments and Critical Contributions**

Recent scholarship has continued to emphasize the role of the arts in fostering emotional engagement, empathy, collaboration, and inclusive participation, particularly in diverse educational settings. Earlier large-scale research has also linked arts engagement with positive academic and social outcomes among young people from low socioeconomic backgrounds (Catterall et al., 2012). Emerging work on embodied and arts-based pedagogy further suggests that structured music-and-movement approaches can strengthen collaborative learning, embodied participation, and student engagement in educational contexts (Weatherly, 2025). Together, these contributions support a reflective and equity-centered approach to arts-based education.

Further, initiatives in social and emotional learning (SEL) that incorporate the arts, such as those explored by Lashley & Nott (2025), underscore how artistic practices can support teacher reflection and emotional resilience. Silverman et al. (2025) examine music and storytelling in STEAM settings as tools for gender inclusion and culturally responsive learning, while the ELLA project (2024) highlights how embodied language learning through drama and song enhances communication in multilingual and neurodiverse contexts. In parallel, recent research on movement-based learning suggests that structured music-and-movement pedagogies can strengthen collaborative learning, embodied participation, and student engagement in educational settings (Weatherly, 2025). In addition, recent scholarship on embodied learning cautions that bodily engagement, although pedagogically promising, must remain contextually and culturally grounded in order to avoid superficial applications. Together, these contributions support a reflective and equity-centered approach to arts-based education.

Recent education policy frameworks also reinforce these pedagogical approaches. The **European Commission (2020, 2023) and UNESCO (2024)** advocate for the arts as essential to inclusive, lifelong learning, emphasizing their contribution to equity, creativity, self-expression, and cultural participation. These positions align with the study’s emphasis on arts as both content and method for inclusive and holistic education.

### Synthesis

Taken together, these theoretical and empirical strands converge on a vision of arts-based pedagogy as multimodal, embodied, inclusive, and transformative. It is multimodal in that it engages learners through multiple sensory and symbolic channels; embodied in its recognition of the physical dimension of cognition and expression; inclusive in its support for differentiation, agency, and social-emotional development; and transformative in its capacity to enable learners and educators to construct shared meaning and imagine alternative futures. This synthesis anchors the present study in a dynamic and critically informed theoretical landscape. It acknowledges the epistemological value of the arts and presents them as effective mediators of interdisciplinary teaching. These approaches are learner-centered and responsive to social and cultural contexts. By incorporating both classical and recent sources, the framework achieves coherence while remaining relevant to contemporary educational discourse.

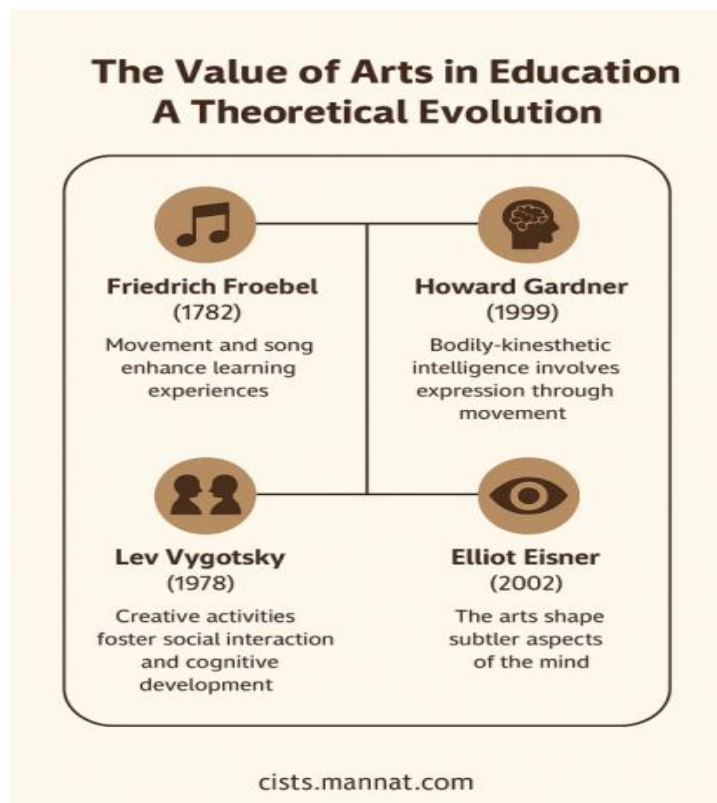


Figure 1. Evolving Roles of the Arts in Education: From Expression to Inclusion.

A visual synthesis of key educational theories that have shaped the evolving role of the arts - from early expression - centered models to inclusive and socially responsive pedagogies. This conceptual progression supports the article's theoretical framework on arts-based, embodied learning.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Design**

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive research design informed by the principles of Arts-Based Educational Research (ABER) (Barone & Eisner, 2012). This methodological orientation is appropriate for examining the embodied, affective, and experiential dimensions of learning, particularly in contexts where meaning is constructed through artistic, relational, and multimodal forms of participation. The study was designed to explore how music, dance, and theatrical expression can foster inclusive, multimodal, and learner-centered environments in Greek lower secondary schools.

### **Research Context and Participants**

The study was conducted in four urban lower secondary schools in Greece, each serving a culturally diverse student population. These schools had either incorporated creative arts into their formal curriculum or implemented arts-based activities through extracurricular or interdisciplinary initiatives. The participating student groups reflected a broad range of linguistic, cognitive, and social backgrounds. All participating teachers had received initial training in inclusive teaching approaches and the educational use of the arts, with reference to the principles of Universal Design for Learning (CAST, 2018).

### **Data Collection**

Using Stake's (1995) case study approach, the research documented the implementation and perceived impact of arts-based pedagogical interventions in authentic classroom settings. Data were collected from multiple qualitative sources, including teacher reflection journals, student-produced materials such as scripts, musical compositions, and choreographic drafts, as well as guided interviews and non-participant classroom observations. The use of multiple data sources enabled a more comprehensive understanding of both teaching practice and student participation.

### **Pedagogical Design and Instructional Implementation**

The methodological framework was structured around three interrelated principles: the arts as pedagogical catalysts for engagement and emotional expression; embodied and student-centered learning through music, dance, and drama; and equity-oriented inclusion through multimodal forms of participation. Each intervention was co-designed with educators and integrated into subject areas including literature, history, and citizenship education. The instructional design followed a flexible structure informed by project-based learning, experiential activities, and reflective assessment practices. The aim was to cultivate emotional engagement, creative agency, intercultural awareness, and collaborative meaning-making through embodied expression.

### **Data Analysis and Ethical Considerations**

All participants provided informed consent, and ethical standards relating to anonymity and confidentiality were strictly maintained through the use of pseudonyms. Qualitative data were analyzed thematically following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework. Coding focused on recurring patterns related to emotional resonance, peer interaction, multimodal participation, and inclusive engagement.

The following visual representations summarize key dimensions of the methodological framework, highlighting creativity, embodiment, and inclusion as central features of the study design. Their purpose is to provide a concise visual synthesis of the pedagogical logic informing the research.



Figure 2. Methodological Design for Inclusive Pedagogy Grounded in the Arts

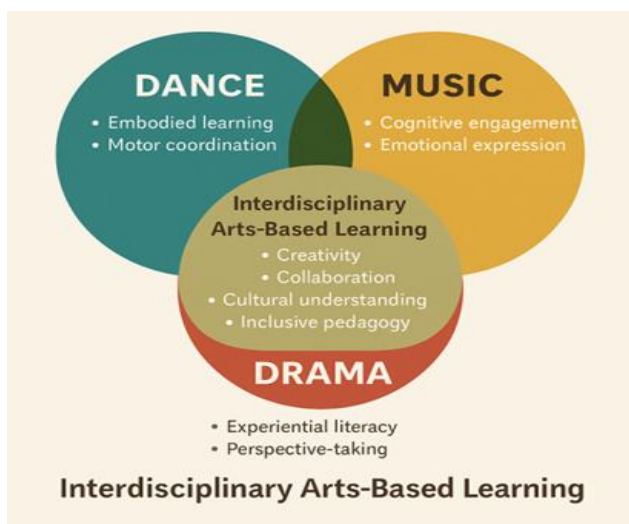


Figure 3. Interdisciplinary Learning through the Arts



Figure 4. The Intersection of the Arts, Inclusion, and Emotional Intelligence

## RESULTS

The findings of the study indicate that music, dance, and theatrical expression can support active learning, multimodal participation, and holistic student development in secondary education. Across the examined classroom contexts, arts-based practices appeared to foster emotional engagement, collaboration, differentiated participation, and more inclusive forms of interaction. The following subsections present the main thematic findings concerning music, dance, drama, and interdisciplinary arts-based projects.

### Music and Emotional-Cognitive Engagement

The findings suggest that music functioned as both an expressive and cognitive medium within the participating classrooms. Teachers reported that collaborative rhythm activities, interpretive composition, and songwriting tasks increased student engagement and enabled learners to approach curricular material through emotional and symbolic forms of understanding. These practices appeared particularly valuable in language and literature lessons, where students were invited to translate themes, moods, and character dynamics into rhythm, melody, and spoken-word performance.

In several cases, music-based activities enabled participation from students who were less responsive to conventional text-based instruction. Teachers observed that such students often demonstrated understanding more confidently when invited to work through sound, rhythm, and collective composition. These findings suggest that music supported not only emotional expression, but also memory, attention, and interpersonal responsiveness within the classroom.

One representative example involved a language arts class in which students created a short song or spoken-word performance based on a literary text. Through rhythm, melody, and emotional interpretation, they expressed central themes and demonstrated understanding through multiple modes of communication.



Figure 5. Collaborative songwriting exercise in a secondary classroom

### Dance and Embodied Learning

Dance and movement-based activities were associated with heightened bodily awareness, social interaction, and non-verbal participation. Teachers described movement as a particularly effective pedagogical tool for students who benefited from kinaesthetic, sensory, or visually structured forms of learning. In history and

social studies contexts, choreographed tasks and spatial movement exercises enabled students to explore abstract concepts such as migration, identity, and transition through embodied representation.

The findings further indicate that dance-based learning created inclusive opportunities for participation by offering alternatives to exclusively verbal expression. This was especially relevant for students with attentional differences, multilingual backgrounds, or varying levels of confidence in oral discussion. Collaborative movement tasks also appeared to strengthen classroom cohesion by encouraging co-regulation, shared timing, and mutual responsiveness.

One illustrative example involved students in a history class collaboratively creating a movement sequence to represent historical migration routes. Through body positioning, transitions, and group coordination, learners explored geopolitical and cultural change in ways that made historical knowledge physically and socially meaningful.



Figure 6. Exploring historical migration through choreographed movement in a secondary classroom

### **Drama and Experiential Literacy Development**

Drama-based activities emerged as particularly powerful for perspective-taking, interpretive depth, and collaborative literacy development. Across the participating classrooms, role-play, improvisation, scripted adaptation, and scene construction enabled students to engage actively with narrative, dialogue, and social conflict. Teachers reported that drama supported expressive confidence while also helping students examine moral tensions, social roles, and emotional nuance.

The data suggest that drama provided a valuable framework for students who might otherwise remain peripheral in conventional discussion-based settings. Because dramatic work incorporated gesture, voice, space, and imagination, it allowed students to participate through multiple communicative modes. This multimodal quality appeared especially important in linguistically diverse and inclusive classroom settings.

A recurring example involved students adapting scenes from literary texts into contemporary dramatic scripts. Through rehearsal and reflective discussion, they interpreted character motivation, explored social parallels, and demonstrated deeper engagement with both language and meaning.

### **Interdisciplinary and Inclusive Arts-Based Projects**

The findings indicate that interdisciplinary arts-based projects created strong conditions for collaborative learning, inclusion, and student agency. When music, movement, and drama were integrated within broader project-based units, students appeared more willing to take interpretive risks, contribute personal and cultural knowledge, and participate in shared acts of meaning-making.

Teachers noted that multimodal projects were particularly supportive for students with diverse cognitive strengths and communicative preferences, as these tasks did not privilege a single mode of achievement.

Instead, students could contribute through sound, movement, visual design, performance, writing, or planning. In this sense, arts-based projects functioned as inclusive pedagogical environments rather than as isolated enrichment activities.

One representative example was a collaborative Cultural Heritage Week performance in which students co-created music, choreography, and staged interpretation around themes of identity and community. Teachers reported that the process strengthened peer relationships, increased student ownership, and fostered a stronger sense of classroom belonging.



Figure 7. Community arts project celebrating cultural heritage

## APPLIED PEDAGOGICAL PRACTICES IN ARTS INTEGRATION

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Music</b></p> <p><b>Applied example:</b> Students engaging in a group songwriting session, discussing lyrics and exploring different chord progressions to compose an original piece.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Dance</b></p> <p><b>Applied example:</b> A group of students participating in a dance class, experimenting with body movements to express emotions and tell a story through contemporary dance.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Visual Arts</b></p> <p><b>Applied example:</b> Students creating abstract paintings, exploring color mixing with dylcits to represent emotions and concepts.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Drama</b></p> <p><b>Applied example:</b> Students performing a classroom drama, rehearsing scenes based on then historical events to deepen wiheir understanding of the subject mat-</p>

Figure 8. Multimodal arts integration: Applied pedagogical practices across disciplines

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## Teaching Strategies in Practice

The findings further suggest that the successful implementation of creative methods depended on strategic alignment with curriculum goals, learner profiles, and inclusive teaching principles. Arts-based pedagogy functioned most effectively when it was not treated as an aesthetic supplement, but as a pedagogical mode that fostered embodied cognition, multiliteracies, and meaningful participation.

Teachers appeared to draw productively on pedagogical frameworks such as project-based learning, Universal Design for Learning, and experiential education in order to structure arts-integrated instruction. In these contexts, the educator's role shifted from direct transmission of knowledge to facilitation of inquiry, artistic exploration, and collaborative interpretation. Such strategies emphasized process, reflection, and participation, allowing students to engage with content through emotional, sensory, and social dimensions.

In multicultural educational settings, these methods also supported belonging and the validation of diverse identities. One illustrative example involved an interdisciplinary unit in which students collaboratively designed a performance integrating music, movement, and drama in order to reinterpret a significant historical or literary event. Teachers reported that this process deepened conceptual understanding while also strengthening creativity, collaboration, and socio-emotional learning.

## Teacher Voice and Reflective Insights

Teacher reflections provided an important qualitative dimension to the findings, highlighting the extent to which arts-based pedagogy reshaped professional identity and classroom relationships. Participating educators described music, dance, and theatrical expression not simply as instructional techniques, but as pedagogical practices that altered how they understood participation, capability, and inclusion within the classroom.

Teachers consistently reported that arts-based methods created new spaces for engagement, particularly for students with linguistic, cognitive, or emotional differences. They described classrooms becoming more equitable and emotionally attuned, with creativity, collaboration, and affective engagement helping to reduce anxiety and exclusion. One teacher reflected: "When I invited my students to represent a historical event through movement, I saw previously disengaged learners take on the roles of choreographers, storytellers, and leaders. They were not simply recalling facts, but they were experiencing them" (Teacher A, History and Arts Integration Project).


Such reflections suggest that embodied expression functioned as a bridge between students' inner worlds and academic content. Teachers noted that these practices often created safer emotional spaces and supported deeper interpersonal understanding. A second teacher observed: "A student with selective mutism chose to contribute through music composition. It was the first time her classmates heard her 'voice', not through speech, but through melody. This experience transformed our understanding of what it means to participate" (Teacher B, Language Arts and Music Workshop).

At the same time, the findings indicate that this pedagogical shift was not without difficulty. Several teachers emphasized the need for institutional support, dedicated time for collaborative planning, and sustained professional development in order to feel adequately prepared to design interdisciplinary and inclusive arts-based learning environments. As one participant explained, "We are trained to deliver content, not to choreograph or improvise. Once I embraced the role of facilitator, however, the class evolved into a community. It was demanding, but ultimately rewarding" (Teacher C, Literature and Drama Collaboration).

Taken together, these testimonies underscore the transformative potential of the arts not only for student learning, but also for the redefinition of teacher agency. Through such practices, educators moved beyond conventional instructional roles and toward more reflective, relational, and culturally responsive forms of pedagogy.

## Teacher Insights on Arts-Based Learning


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“When I invited my students to choreograph a historical event, I saw disengaged learners become choreographers, storytellers, and leaders. They were not only recalling facts, they were experiencing them.”

**Teacher A**, History and Arts Integration Project

“A student with selective mutism chose to contribute through music composition. It was the first time her classmates heard her ‘voice,’—not through speech but through melody, It changed the way we understood participation.”



**Teacher B**, Language Arts and Music Workshop



“We had a traditional focus on delivering content rather than on choreography or improvisation. When I adapted to a facilitative approach, the class transformed into a community. It required considerable effort, but it was successful.”

**Teacher C**, Literature and Drama Collaboration

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### Teacher Insights on Arts-Based Learning

Figure 9. Teacher insights on the role of the arts in inclusive learning environments.

This figure presents selected reflections from participating educators, illustrating how arts-based pedagogies shaped teaching practices, supported student engagement, and fostered more inclusive classroom dynamics.

## DISCUSSION

### Interpretation of Findings

The findings of this study reinforce the view that music, dance, and theatrical expression can function as pedagogical modes that connect cognition, emotion, embodiment, and social participation in secondary education. Across the examined classroom contexts, arts-based practices supported not only engagement with curricular content but also the development of empathy, cooperation, self-awareness, and inclusive participation. In this respect, the findings corroborate and extend established perspectives on sociocultural, aesthetic, and embodied learning.

Drawing on the work of Vygotsky (1978), Eisner (2002), Gardner (1999), and Greene (1995), the study affirms the epistemological and developmental significance of the arts in education. Artistic practices functioned both as learning content and as pedagogical tools, offering accessible pathways to participation for neurodiverse learners, students with limited proficiency in the language of instruction, and those facing social or emotional difficulties.

The findings also highlight the relational dimension of arts-based pedagogy, showing that students often engaged more deeply when learning was mediated through collaboration, embodiment, and multimodal expression. A further important finding concerns the evolving role of the educator. Teachers appeared to move from transmission-oriented instruction toward facilitation of inquiry, emotional expression, and creative exploration. This shift aligns with differentiated and learner-centered models of pedagogy, in which the

educator designs reflective, participatory, and inclusive learning environments rather than merely delivering predetermined content.

### **Challenges and Limitations of Arts-Based Pedagogy**

At the same time, the study indicates that the successful implementation of arts-based pedagogy cannot be taken for granted. One important challenge concerns curricular rigidity. In highly structured school environments, time constraints, examination pressures, and content-heavy syllabi may limit the sustained use of open-ended and process-oriented artistic practices.

A second challenge relates to teacher preparation. Although participating educators expressed strong commitment to inclusive and creative teaching, several also emphasized the need for professional development, collaborative planning time, and institutional support.

This suggests that arts-based pedagogy requires not only pedagogical enthusiasm but also structured preparation and sustained organisational backing. Assessment also remains a significant point of tension. Many of the outcomes associated with arts-based learning, including empathy, confidence, collaborative engagement, interpretive depth, and embodied participation, are educationally meaningful but not easily captured through conventional assessment systems.

As a result, schools may struggle to recognize the full value of arts-based work when evaluation frameworks remain narrowly academic or performance-driven. The study is also subject to certain limitations. Its qualitative and context-specific design, while well suited to in-depth interpretation, does not permit broad generalization across all educational settings.

In addition, the research focuses on a limited number of schools within one national context. Future studies could therefore extend this work through longitudinal, comparative, or mixed-methods designs that examine how arts-based pedagogies function across different educational systems and learner populations.

### **Educational Policy Connections and Future Directions**

The documented benefits of arts-based pedagogy, particularly its contribution to inclusion, creativity, and holistic learning, highlight the need for sustained policy support and institutional investment. At European level, the 2018 Council Recommendation on Key Competences for Lifelong Learning identifies cultural awareness and expression as one of the core competences for active citizenship and lifelong learning.

In parallel, the Erasmus+ 2021–2027 framework places strong emphasis on inclusion, diversity, cooperation, and innovation, while Key Action 2 supports partnerships among organisations and institutions for the development and implementation of innovative educational practices. UNESCO's Framework for Culture and Arts Education (2024) further emphasizes inclusive access, creativity, self-expression, and the role of culture and the arts in holistic and lifelong learning.

Taken together, these policy directions strengthen the argument that arts-based education should be understood not as a supplementary enrichment activity but as a legitimate and necessary component of democratic and inclusive schooling.

In practical terms, this implies the need for curriculum frameworks that recognize creative and embodied learning as core educational competencies, expanded professional development in arts-integrated and inclusive pedagogy, stronger collaboration between schools and cultural institutions, and broader assessment models capable of valuing multimodal forms of learning.

Future research should continue to examine scalable models of implementation, long-term educational outcomes, and the policy mechanisms that can support the systematic integration of the arts into secondary education. Such work would further clarify how arts-based pedagogy can contribute to more equitable, human-centered, and socially responsive educational systems.



Figure 10. Policy frameworks for arts integration in education.

This figure summarizes selected European and international policy directions relevant to arts-based education, including lifelong learning, inclusion, cultural awareness, and cross-institutional collaboration.

## CONCLUSION

This study examined how creative learning methods grounded in music, dance, and theatrical expression can support inclusive, emotionally responsive, and interdisciplinary teaching in secondary education. Drawing on a robust theoretical foundation and qualitative classroom evidence, the findings indicate that arts-based practices can foster empathy, collaboration, social connectedness, and multimodal engagement, while also creating alternative pathways to participation for students with diverse cognitive, linguistic, and cultural profiles.

The study further suggests that the educational value of the arts lies not only in artistic expression itself, but in their capacity to connect cognition, emotion, embodiment, and inclusion within a shared process of learning. When embedded within reflective and interdisciplinary teaching practices, music, movement, and drama can help educators create classroom environments that are more participatory, relational, and responsive to learner diversity. At the same time, the study has shown that such pedagogical approaches require institutional support, curriculum flexibility, and sustained professional development if they are to be implemented meaningfully and consistently.

In this respect, the article argues that arts-based pedagogy should be understood not as peripheral enrichment, but as a legitimate and valuable dimension of contemporary education. Future research would benefit from longitudinal, comparative, and context-sensitive studies that examine how sustained artistic engagement influences student identity, teacher agency, and inclusive school culture across different educational settings.

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