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Music and its presence in human life through the lens of pedagogy of accompaniment: Towards teacher stress prevention

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Abstract

Research aim/problem: The aim of this article is to demonstrate the role of music in human life through the lens of the pedagogy of accompaniment, presented as a practical tool to mitigate teachers' stress. The research problem focuses on the following question: What values does music embody, and how can it accompany and support individuals both in their daily life and in the context of stress?

Research method: The study is based on the autobiographical narrative of a teacher educated in both music and music therapy. A proxemic analysis was conducted on selected excerpts from the autobiography that focus on the subject's lifelong relationship with music.

Process of argumentation: Music, as a pervasive phenomenon, fulfils a range of roles in human life, including social, humanistic, and therapeutic functions. The article examines its values, especially the personal relationship with music, through the conceptual framework of Zbigniew Marek's pedagogy of accompaniment. This perspective, incorporated into the analysis, highlights the spaces in which the author of the autobiographical narrative has improved her functioning through her connection with music.

Research findings: Music emerged as a companion across different dimensions of life, providing support, closeness, and assistance in difficult situations, everyday struggles, moments of reflection, and spiritual experience.

Conclusion/recommendations: Engagement with music as a means of coping with stress may constitute a valuable dimension of individual

burnout-prevention strategies and contribute to improving the quality of teachers' professional functioning and teaching practice, as well as more systemic solutions, including the implementation of programmes that incorporate music into teacher well-being support initiatives.

Introduction

The educational environment is frequently associated with stress. Various theoretical approaches have conceptualised this phenomenon over time. Hans Selye understood stress as the organism's non-specific response to external demands, whereas Richard Lazarus and Susan Folkman emphasised the dynamic interaction between the individual and the environment. Johannes Siegrist's effort–reward imbalance model explains occupational stress as resulting from a discrepancy between work effort and received rewards. Closely linked to stress is professional burnout, conceptualised by Christina Maslach as consisting of emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation, and a reduced sense of personal accomplishment. In this perspective, burnout develops through prolonged exposure to emotional and interpersonal stressors combined with insufficient recovery (Wilczek-Rużyczka et al., 2019).

For these reasons, teaching is recognised as a highly challenging profession, as chronic stress constitutes a significant risk factor for mental and physical well-being as well as burnout. Teachers' psychological health is particularly important because it indirectly affects the pupils they teach (Agyapong & Wei, 2024; Agyapong et al., 2022). Teacher stress is considered an international phenomenon characterised by unpleasant emotions resulting from teaching work, including excessive workload, time pressure, low student motivation, diversity in the classroom, conflicts with colleagues, lack of administrative support, and value conflicts. These stressors may contribute to a reduced sense of self-efficacy and increased emotional strain, which in turn influence teachers' perceptions of stressors within the school environment (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2016).

Considering the consequences of stress and professional burnout, it is essential to develop preventive strategies that address teachers'

personal needs in the context of contemporary educational challenges. A review of stress-reduction interventions used among teachers identified multiple approaches, including mindfulness-based interventions, yoga, cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), stress management training, relaxation techniques, physical activity, emotional intelligence models, gratitude interventions, and spiritual practices such as prayer (Agyapong et al., 2023; Agyapong & Wei, 2024; Avola et al., 2025).

One such possibility, and the focus of this article, is engagement with music from a music therapy perspective. Music interventions, understood as purposeful experiences involving listening to music, making music, or singing, support the development of a personal relationship with music. Although music therapy research widely recognises the stress-reducing effects of music (e.g., Chanda & Levitin, 2013; Koelsch, 2015; Mehr et al., 2019, as cited in de Witte, 2021), this issue still rarely appears in broader interdisciplinary discourse. The aim of this article, therefore, is to demonstrate the role of music in human life through the lens of the pedagogy of accompaniment, presented as a practical tool to mitigate teachers' stress. This approach to music's presence in everyday life serves as an attempt to answer the question of what values music embodies and how it can accompany and support individuals in their daily lives, particularly in the context of stress.

Music as a ubiquitous contemporary phenomenon

Music has accompanied humanity since its earliest existence, evolving from natural sounds supporting survival to a universal cultural phenomenon created and experienced by people across societies (Stachyra, 2012). Throughout history, music has been recognised for its aesthetic, educational, and therapeutic potential (Natanson, 1978). Artistic expression is considered an innate human characteristic, like speech or tool-making, evidenced by prehistoric artistic artefacts such as cave paintings, figurines, and statuettes, dating back between 50,000 and 100,000 years, and instruments such as the 45,000-year-old bone flute (Thaut, 2015; Vick, 2014).

The earliest written accounts of music's healing effects are found in Egyptian papyri from the 15th century BCE (Stachyra, 2012). In ancient Greece and Rome, these properties were developed particularly through the theory of ethos, which assumed a close relationship between music and the soul. Human beings were understood as a microcosm reflecting the harmony of the cosmos; consequently, music, especially through scales, rhythm, and catharsis, was believed to restore inner balance and support healing. The theory of musical ethos became a foundation of Greek *paideia* (Bramorski, 2012). While early understandings of music were closely linked to metaphysical and magical-religious beliefs, Hippocrates introduced a more rational perspective grounded in observations of human nature and the body, shifting attention away from mystical interpretations of healing (Thaut, 2015).

Today, music is considered a ubiquitous phenomenon accompanying everyday life. (Czerniawska, 2012). When strategically used in commercial settings, music can influence consumer behaviour, enhance brand identity, and shape purchasing intentions (Łopaciuk-Goc, 2012; Makomaska, 2020). Music is also present in sports, film, and theatre, shaping audiences' emotional reception of the visual narrative (Migut & Wrzałka, 2012).

In everyday life, music takes on yet another dimension. Listening to, performing, or singing music initiates a direct engagement and a unique form of contact. Listening to music is a significant aspect of daily life, as people often devote more time to it than to other leisure pursuits (Rentfrow & Gosling, 2003). This widespread appeal is attributed to music's capacity to generate emotional rewards (Zentner et al., 2008). Listening activates the brain's reward system, the same one stimulated by food, sweets, sex, alcohol, and certain drugs (Christensen, 2019). Listening to music may be either passive or active. When music serves as background noise during other tasks, it generally does not engage conscious awareness, remaining at the periphery of the listener's attention. In contrast, active listening places music at the centre of attention, requiring intentional and volitional focus (Makomaska, 2020).

These modes of listening initiate human interaction with music, involving both direct and mediated forms of engagement, such as through

a physical device like an audio player. Direct engagement occurs when people attend live performances or participate in musical activities, experiencing sound as a form of physical energy. This experience activates what is known as behavioural resonance. One of the primary reasons people attend concerts is to experience this resonance – the sensation of being physically moved by music. These internal states are not based on cognitive reflection or musical analysis but are instead described in deeply embodied terms such as “corporeal immersion in sound energy,” being “carried away,” or even “getting absorbed by music” (Leman, 2008, p. 4). The experience of direct engagement is subjective and rooted in personal perception as well as social interaction. It emerges when one is part of an audience listening at a concert, or when a performer within a group is playing music or singing (Leman, 2008).

Qualities of music and the human relationship with it

Music is a pervasive element in human life and, depending on the context of engagement, it performs educational, aesthetic, cathartic, and social functions, shaping attitudes and fostering social identification (Gołaszewska, 1986; Lewandowski, 2014). Moreover, music holds significant educational potential. Listening to music can support the development of personal identity, prompt reflections on adulthood, and contribute to the shaping of adult life (Leman, 2008; Łuciuk-Wojczuk, 2023).

The qualities of music stem from its dual character: it is both a physical phenomenon, consisting of acoustic waves, and a perceptual experience. As a symbolic art form, its perception is shaped by a range of musical components – melody, timbre, dynamics, harmony, and rhythm – each of which can affect the human being, including on a physiological level. Perception is also influenced by an individual’s psychophysical condition, the context of musical engagement, personal preferences, and cultural background (Juslin & Västfjäll, 2008). The physiological impact of music is linked to its vibratory nature, as music and sound act directly on the brain and body (Bonde, 2019a).

These characteristics of music can be analysed across several levels, which are particularly relevant in therapeutic contexts but are also evident in everyday experiences, even those that occur without deliberate engagement. In addition to the physiological level, these are the syntactic, semantic, and practical-interpersonal ones. The syntactic level refers to experiencing music as a communicative language, which is aesthetically expressive and identifiable through musical styles such as classical, popular, folk, or jazz. At this level, the organisation of acoustic elements according to musical structure plays a significant role. The semantic level addresses the existential and spiritual significance of music, as well as its ability to evoke moods and meanings. These aspects contribute to the development of a personal relationship with music, as listeners often ascribe extra-musical meanings to it. During musical engagement, multi-modal imagery, a broad spectrum of emotions, and spontaneous associations with personal experiences or existential themes may be activated. The final level – the practical and interpersonal – encompasses the social and cultural dimensions of music, including its use in rituals and recreational activities. Such experiences foster new social bonds and strengthen existing ones (Bonde, 2019b).

Beyond its multifaceted qualities, music's evocative potential is especially important. It can elicit a wide range of emotional responses through mechanisms such as brainstem reflexes, evaluative conditioning, emotional contagion, visual imagery, episodic memory, and musical expectancy. Insights from neuroscience and psychology have contributed to our understanding of these processes and the still-emerging knowledge of how music affects humans (Edwards, 2016; Galińska, 2015; Juslin & Västfjäll, 2008).

A specific form of deepening the relationship with music as a stress-regulation strategy is music therapy practice, such as music listening. De Witte et al. (2022) report that music listening is strongly associated with stress reduction through decreased physiological arousal, including lower cortisol levels, heart rate, and mean arterial pressure. It also reduces negative affect, such as worry, anxiety, restlessness, and nervousness, while enhancing positive emotions, including happiness. These effects are

linked to the music-induced modulation of brain structures involved in emotional and motivational processing, particularly the amygdala and the mesolimbic reward system. Moreover, the systematic use of music in therapy tailored to patient needs may enhance these effects. Group-based music activities can foster interpersonal synchronisation, contributing to feelings of togetherness and social bonding, potentially mediated by endorphin and oxytocin release, which are important in stress regulation. Finally, music listening may also reduce stress by providing cognitive distraction from stress-inducing thoughts and emotions (de Witte et al., 2022).

Methodological assumptions

The source material analysed in this study is the autobiography of a teacher and music therapist, which formed part of the primary dataset for the doctoral dissertation *The experience of music therapy in shaping women's adulthood*. The present re-analysis serves to deepen the original research project, which focused on exploring how music therapy experiences shape adulthood in women. As the original analysis revealed a strong lifelong bond and even love for music among the participants, this subsequent examination centres on gaining a deeper understanding of that relationship and interpreting it through the lens of Zbigniew Marek's (2017) pedagogy of accompaniment.

The pedagogy of accompaniment is rooted in the traditions of Ignatian pedagogy and the Ignatian model. Drawing on the spiritual and pedagogical insights of Saint Ignatius of Loyola, this approach emphasises the role of the teacher as a companion who supports the student in achieving the fullness of personal and social development (Marek, 2017). The resulting Ignatian model organises the learning process into a coherent developmental path, consisting of the following stages: context (identifying the essential value of a given experience), reflection (uncovering the deeper meaning of that experience), inspiration for action (fostering the formation of values, attitudes, and ideals), and assessing

the outcomes of these actions (Marek & Walulik, 2020). As Marek notes, this form of pedagogical accompaniment “can be likened to a shared journey toward the achievement of a common goal” (2017, p. 292).

The analytical method applied in this study – proxemic analysis – represents an emerging trend in qualitative research. It considers qualitative data as spatially and temporally situated, requiring a holistic understanding of life histories and their lived context (Marek & Walulik, 2019). This approach involves identifying entities within five categories – actors (both personal and non-personal), time, place, values, and expectations – as well as uncovering the relationships that connect these entities and categories, which play a significant role in attempting to understand the experience (Marek & Walulik, 2020).

The use of the pedagogy of accompaniment in analysing the music therapist’s autobiographical narrative enabled the personified role of music to be foregrounded. Music may be understood as a relational presence, both internally in subjective experience and externally within therapeutic interaction, where it functions as a “third element” alongside therapist and client (Bryndal & Procter, 2012). In this form, music generates personally meaningful, affectively grounded experiences that emerge from lived context and become integrated into the individual’s emotional and cognitive world.

Analysis

During the analysis of the autobiography, narrative fragments (entities) were identified within the categories of actors, place, time, values, and expectations, with a focus on music as a companion in everyday life. Music emerged as the central, personified actor, accompanying the narrator across multiple domains of experience.

Within the pedagogical framework of accompaniment, the categories of time and place were deemed analytically marginal and excluded. A clear overlap was observed between the entities identified within the categories of values and expectations: values were understood

as the meanings attributed to music, while expectations reflected the anticipated recurrence of these valued experiences. Due to space limitations, only selected narrative excerpts are presented.

In the actors category, the following excerpts portray music as a companion:

“music accompanies me at all times, in moments of joy and sorrow”

“each day, music accompanies me in discovering the beauty of the world, helping to reveal what is most beautiful and perfect”

“from early childhood, music accompanied me during play, and later, during my school years, in learning”

Within the values category, the following entities reflect the significance of music as a companion to the narrator:

A helping companion: “I could feel the positive vibration in this music [by W. A. Mozart]... the harmony... the beauty of the sounds... it made it easier for me to concentrate and study”

A companion of closeness: “in moments of isolation and a lack of close relationships, it was music that embraced me and stayed by my side”

A companion of reflection: “through playing or listening, I was able to [...] pause, reflect, and see my experiences from a different perspective”

In the expectations category, the following content reflects the recurring value brought by music:

A background companion in daily life: “It helps me act (clean, cook, bake), to relax, to reflect, and to ease my loneliness”

A companion offering support: “it often helps me through difficult situations involving male-female relationships [...] and also through challenging moments at work”

The narrator’s professional life is also shaped by her role as an accompanist for a girls’ choir:

A companion in a relationship with God: “I left rehearsals feeling fulfilled [...] sometimes I like to pray using the words of a song, silently hearing the melody”; “Gospel singing gave me a sense of being enveloped, of calm, of joy in being and singing together”

These excerpts reveal the pervasive presence of music throughout the narrator’s life, illustrating her multifaceted, deeply personal relationship with music that began in her early childhood and developed over time and across her life experiences.

Research findings

The proxemic analysis focused on narrative elements related to experiences of a relationship with music. Examining these experiences through the lens of the pedagogy of accompaniment enabled the formulation of several key conclusions and, despite the individual and limited scope of the findings, allowed for the identification of synergistic qualities as well as the contexts and areas in which a person’s relationship with music is shaped in a personalised manner.

Drawing on the narrator’s lived experiences interpreted within the framework of the pedagogy of accompaniment, music was understood as a companion offering help, support, closeness, and a sense of presence in difficult situations, moments of reflection, everyday experiences, and relationship with God. Furthermore, the relationship with music as a companion was found to illuminate pathways of everyday existence and resonate deeply within the author, including at a transcendent level, encompassing both internal and external experience.

Framing these conclusions within the pedagogy of accompaniment highlights the role of music in shaping human interiority. Music not only evokes experiences but also conveys individualised meaning understood uniquely by the experiencing person. As an emotional medium, music’s evocative potential elicits emotional responses on physiological, syntactic, semantic, and practical-experiential levels (Bonde, 2019a; Juslin

& Västfjäll, 2008), which participate in fostering a meaningful relationship with music.

The message conveyed through musical experience is deeply embedded, as music exerts multidimensional influence on personality, supporting emotional, cognitive, creative, and aesthetic experiences (Galińska, 2015). From a music therapy perspective, musical experiences engage brain mechanisms associated with learning and transfer to non-musical functions, thereby influencing behavioural and cognitive functioning through neural plasticity and the activation of multiple brain regions (Altenmüller & Schlaug, 2013; Thaut, 2005, as cited in Galińska, 2015).

This conceptualisation of musical experience aligns with the Ignatian model, consisting of context, experience, reflection, action, and evaluation. These dimensions may be applied to understanding musical experiences occurring in everyday contexts – whether intuitive or conscious, physiological or emotional, aesthetic or spiritual. Music may inspire reflection and appreciation of its influence on human functioning, including its professional application in therapeutic contexts such as music therapy.

The findings presented above lead to the conclusion that music emerged as a companion in various dimensions of life, offering support, closeness, and assistance in difficult situations, everyday struggles, moments of reflection, and spiritual experience. This conclusion aligns with one of the outcomes of the dissertation, which indicated that the relationship with music served as an educational path for all narrators in their personal and professional lives (Łuciuk-Wojczuk, 2023)..

On the basis of all the presented outcomes, an interdisciplinary implication emerges: the personal use of music by teachers as a means of coping with stress may constitute a valuable dimension of individual burnout-prevention strategies and, indirectly, contribute to improving the quality of their professional functioning and teaching practice. These implications are further supported by music's well-documented role in stress reduction and well-being enhancement (de Witte et al., 2022), as music therapy practices in the educational environment contribute to more effective professional functioning and, indirectly, to improved

teaching and learning outcomes. Such practices may help prevent stress-related burnout and reduced well-being. Engagement with music may also strengthen teachers' sense of self-efficacy (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2016).

The findings also suggest broader educational implications. Owing to music's multidimensional regulatory and supportive functions, engagement with music may represent a meaningful component of preventive strategies aimed not only at teachers but also to students functioning within the same educational environment. The lack of teacher support is observed as a "flow-on effect," as teachers' mental health is said to have a direct correlation with students' mental health. This phenomenon has been observed globally, particularly since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic; as a result, numerous initiatives involving music therapy interventions among students are currently underway in educational contexts (Krüger et al., 2023). Studies conducted among medical students, for example, indicate that music therapy used as a holistic approach yielded promising results in improving mood and regulating emotions. Consequently, music-based and music therapy interventions may constitute valuable tools for supporting emotional regulation, reducing stress-related burdens, and strengthening psychological resources among students exposed to chronic school-related stressors (Chen et al., 2024).

Examples of innovative solutions and initiatives are being developed in Norway for teachers who, in response to global needs, implement approaches based on the concept of *learning to learn* using music therapy-informed theories, which are both relevant in classroom settings and a vehicle for creating learning environments that support students' psychological well-being (Krüger et al., 2023).

In summary, by supporting stress reduction and strengthening emotional regulation, a personal relationship with music and music therapy practices may contribute to more effective professional functioning among teachers. At the same time, by reducing the perceived intensity of stressors, they may strengthen teachers' sense of self-efficacy and indirectly support improved teaching and learning outcomes.

Conclusion and recommendations

The findings and implications emerging from both the present study and the existing literature allow several interdisciplinary recommendations to be formulated, particularly within educational environments characterised by high levels of emotional strain.

The inclusion of specialised music therapy approaches within school support programmes may constitute a valuable direction for contemporary educational and mental health practice, particularly in light of the growing recognition that the emotional condition of both teachers and students significantly influences the quality of educational processes and interpersonal functioning within school environments. Preventive initiatives may therefore encompass both individual strategies undertaken by teachers and students and systemic educational solutions, including the implementation of innovative programmes aimed at supporting emotional regulation and psychological well-being in educational settings. Such recommendations appear particularly relevant given the growing interest in the potential of music as a supportive resource within school communities (Krüger et al., 2023).

At the same time, the consequences of stress are increasingly recognised as a global challenge affecting educational environments, further emphasising the need for interdisciplinary preventive interventions supporting psychological resilience, emotional well-being, and effective professional functioning. The findings also indicate the need for further empirical and interdisciplinary research examining the role of music-based interventions in educational contexts, particularly with regard to their long-term impact on stress reduction, emotional regulation, teachers' professional functioning, and educational outcomes. Such research may contribute to the development of evidence-based educational and therapeutic practices responsive to the contemporary challenges faced by school communities.

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