

HARMONIZING GROWTH: EXPLORING MUSICAL DEVELOPMENT THROUGH PSYCHOSOCIAL SKILLS IN ADOLESCENT EDUCATION

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Psychosocial skills – often referred to as psychosocial competence, soft skills, or non-cognitive strengths – are particularly crucial during adolescence, a period characterized by substantial changes across neurobiological, physical, cognitive, and socio-emotional domains. Adolescence represents a pivotal phase of life during which the capacities for achieving full human potential are most profoundly developed. Given that psychosocial skills are malleable and continue to develop throughout life, it is important to prioritize their cultivation – especially during adolescence. Consistent support from key individuals, particularly during the school years, plays a vital role in strengthening adolescents’ psychosocial competence.

This article emphasizes the need for research on the role of psychosocial skills in education, an area that remains unexplored in Latvia. Latvia’s unique music education system not only nurtures young musical talent but also reinforces national identity. Given this, it is essential to investigate adolescent musical development through psychosocial dimensions. The diversity of music education opportunities in Latvia provides a valuable context for both theoretical and, more importantly, empirical research, whose evidence-based findings could be implemented in educational practice through collaboration among all stakeholders. Accordingly, this article aims to provide an overview of the construct of psychosocial skills in adolescence and to examine the Latvian music education system as a context for research. Furthermore, it argues for the integration of psychosocial skill development into music education.

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Keywords: psychosocial skills, adolescents, music education in Latvia, musical development

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, increasing attention has been directed toward mental health, well-being, and the development of psychosocial competence. This growing interest is reflected in various international initiatives and research efforts dedicated to incorporating psychosocial skills into educational policies and practices. For example, in 2021, France launched a national strategy aimed at developing psychosocial competencies in all children and young people aged 3 to 25 (Lambooy et al. 2022, 1). Similarly, the World Health Organization (WHO 2023) emphasizes the importance of fostering emotional and social well-being in schools as part of its Health-Promoting and Child-Friendly Schools framework.

Promoting the socio-emotional well-being of young people is vital. This involves fostering supportive environments and deliberately cultivating psychosocial skills, which are essential for positive personal development. The school context is particularly important in this regard, as adolescents spend a significant part of their lives in educational settings, where they face various social, emotional, and academic challenges, among others. These experiences influence not only their cognitive development but also shape emotional regulation, intra- and interpersonal skills, self-identity, and overall well-being.

Psychosocial skills are now widely recognized as strong predictors of academic, professional, and overall life outcomes (Lipnevich, Preckel, and Roberts 2016, 376). Moreover, these skills are considered especially crucial during adolescence, a period marked by major transformations in goal setting, learning attitudes, and ability development (Voitova et al. 2025, 184). In the context of education – particularly in Latvia – psychosocial skills have thus far received limited attention. However, interest in this area has increased in recent years. For example, in 2022, the General Education Law in Latvia was amended to require general education program implementers to provide learners with systemic support for the development of social and emotional competencies (Saeima 2022). Similarly, studies have emerged addressing socio-emotional and behavioural issues among adolescents, alongside their well-being within the school context (see Bezborodovs 2024; Cāzere-Pakalne and Svence 2020).

However, there is a lack of studies on the relationship between psychosocial skills and musical development or musically gifted education in Latvia. Moreover, these skills have not been systematically incorporated into advanced music curricula (Voitova et al. 2025, 198). Thus, this paper advocates for the integration of psychosocial skills into music education and employs the Latvian music education system as a research context to identify strengths and barriers. To contextualize the research focus, the subsequent sections explore the concept of psychosocial skills and examine the structure and characteristics of the Latvian music education system.

1. PSYCHOSOCIAL SKILLS

1.1. Terminology and definitions

The literature presents a wide range of terms used to define and describe the concept of *psychosocial skills*. Moreover, numerous alternative terms appear throughout the literature and are often used interchangeably, including soft skills, noncognitive factors, personal qualities, and non-intellectual strengths, among others (Kyllonen et al. 2014, 4; Voitova et al. 2025, 185). For example, Dixson et al. (2016) use the terms psychosocial factors and variables synonymously, while Subotnik et al. (2011) use them interchangeably with skills, abilities, and components. Other authors refer to psychosocial competence or psychological capacity (Basak 2022, 60).

As stated in the Dictionary of Psychology of American Psychological Association, the term *psychosocial factors* is defined as:

“social, cultural, and environmental phenomena and influences that affect mental health and behaviour. These influences include social situations, relationships, and pressures, such as competition for education, health care, and other social resources” (APA n.d.).

This definition encompasses various components of psychosocial competence, emphasizing that mental health is not solely a personal matter but is profoundly shaped by external factors, including the social relationships and environments in which we live.

Other authors also highlight the dual intra- and interpersonal dimensions of psychosocial competence, asserting that “psychosocial factors refer to motivational constructs that are affected by both psychological and social contexts” (Dixson et al. 2016, 67).

More specifically, referring to health promotion, behaviour, and the ability to cope with difficulties, Basak defines *psychosocial competence* as “the ability to exercise control over one’s life, to effectively deal with specific difficulties, and to create adjustments to one’s behaviour and environment” (Basak 2022, 63).

This represents only a limited selection of existing definitions. However, a unifying factor across these and other definitions – as well as a key distinction from cognitive or so-called hard skills – is that psychosocial skills are closely linked to mental health and well-being, behavioural and socio-emotional capacities, and positive personality development. This is particularly important in today’s rapidly changing world, where individuals must continuously adapt to complex social dynamics. The development of psychosocial skills becomes even more crucial during adolescence – a life stage widely recognized as a sensitive period.

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1.2. Psychosocial skills in adolescence

According to the World Health Organization, “adolescence is the phase of life between childhood and adulthood, from ages 10 to 19. It is a unique stage of human development and an important time for laying foundations of good health” (WHO n.d.).

It is also claimed that adolescence “ends with physiological and neurobiological maturity, shown in neuro-scientific research to extend to at least age 20” (APA n.d.).

This makes adolescence a particularly vulnerable and dynamic phase of personality development, as it involves significant physical, cognitive, and socio-emotional changes that influence brain function, behaviour, self-identity, emotional intelligence, among others. This complex developmental process is primarily shaped by social environments, as adolescents’ self-identity changes in response to interactions with peers, family, and school (Raufelder et al. 2021, 1). The quality of social relationships

plays a critical role in supporting healthy psychosocial development, highlighting the importance of consistent emotional support from the various communities surrounding adolescents during this formative stage.

Although personality has traditionally been viewed as fixed, recent studies emphasize that the development of psychosocial skills is a lifelong process (Basak 2022, 63), and that personality and psychosocial skills – like many other skills – can be developed and improved across the lifespan (Burrus and Brenneman 2016, 20; Kyllonen et al. 2014, 2). Moreover, these skills are malleable and continue to evolve over time (Burrus and Brenneman 2016, 20; Dixson et al. 2016, 74; Kyllonen et al. 2014, 2; Subotnik et al. 2011, 7). Furthermore, it is argued that the malleability of personality development is particularly pronounced during adolescence (Jebb et al., 2006, 126). In the case of children and adolescents, these skills can – and should – be deliberately taught and cultivated by educators, parents, and other influential figures (Dixson et al. 2016, 74; Subotnik et al. 2011, 7). This underscores the importance of a supportive environment provided by the community surrounding the adolescent, including the school, family, and other social institutions.

1.3. Psychosocial skills and (music) education

As school is an integral part of young people's lives, it is important to recognize its role not only in their academic development but also in promoting their overall well-being, as well as in preparing them for adult life by equipping them with skills to navigate personal and professional challenges. Alongside cognitive abilities, a growing emphasis nowadays is placed on psychosocial skills. Numerous studies have shown that psychosocial skills, e.g., self-discipline, hope, grit, motivation, and a growth mindset, play a crucial role in education (Dixson et al. 2017, 1; Kyllonen et al. 2014, 3). These skills not only support effective learning but also correlate with higher academic outcomes (Basak 2022, 61; Burrus & Brenneman 2016; Yeager and Walton 2011, 268). Achievement in educational environments undoubtedly enhances motivation, confidence, self-efficacy, and perseverance, which are key components of psychosocial competence, particularly in adolescence. Indeed, academic success and psychosocial strength are mutually reinforcing, with positive educational outcomes contributing significantly to the development of psychosocial skills, and vice versa. Therefore, teaching psychosocial skills should be a deliberate goal of education (Kyllonen et al. 2014, 10; Lipnevich, Preckel, and Roberts 2016, 381).

It is widely recognized that music training not only enhances musical abilities but also positively influences cognitive abilities (Hallam 2010, 270; Müllensiefen and Harrison 2020, 234). However, a growing body of research also highlights the beneficial impact of music on psychosocial competence and well-being (Hallam 2010, 270; Müllensiefen and Harrison 2020, 224). This is particularly significant in the domain of gifted education, as talented pupils often face greater pressure and various difficulties and therefore require a specialized approach that not only nurtures their cognitive

abilities and professional skills in a particular domain but also supports their overall well-being.

Authors have identified psychosocial skills as key contributors to successful talent development (Subotnik et al. 2011, 7). Additionally, it is claimed that these skills are malleable and must be deliberately cultivated in gifted education (Dixson et al. 2016, 74). Similarly, the initial findings of Voitova et al.'s study on the influence of psychosocial skills on musical ability development demonstrate that these skills play a significant role in fostering musical abilities during adolescence, suggesting that the introduction psychosocial competence in earlier stages of gifted education should be considered essential (Voitova et al. 2025, 198). Undoubtedly, this requires the involvement of multiple stakeholders – including family support, specialized qualifications and competencies among educators, and positive environment, among others.

Having outlined the concept of psychosocial skills and their relevance in adolescence, we now explore their integration within the framework of Latvian music education. This examination reveals where psychosocial skills are currently fostered and uncovers existing gaps. The following section provides an overview of an exclusive music education system in Latvia, whose distinctive features particularly emphasize the special needs of learners, suggesting a tailored approach to instruction as well as the involvement of the adolescents' surrounding social environment. Before that, an exploration of the historical background and recent developments in musical heritage is presented to contextualize the origins of the system.

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2. LATVIA'S UNIQUE MUSIC EDUCATION SYSTEM: A NURTURING ENVIRONMENT FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF TALENT

2.1. Historical context and contemporary developments

It is important to emphasize that music education in Latvia is deeply intertwined with the nation's strong musical heritage. Latvia is highly regarded for its rich musical traditions, especially in choral singing and folk music, as well as in performing arts. Latvia hosts a variety of nationally and internationally recognized music events – festivals, competitions, concert series. One of the most prominent music events is the The Nationwide Latvian Song and Dance Festival (*Vispārējie Latviešu Dziesmu un Deju svētki*) which was inscribed in 2003 on UNESCO's List of the Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity (*Vispārējie Latviešu Dziesmu un Deju Svētki* n.d.). There are also a number of other music events, such as the Liepāja International Piano Stars Festival (*Starptautiskais Pianisma zvaigžņu festivāls*), the Latvian Composers' Union festival "Latvian New Music Days" (*Latvijas jaunās mūzikas dienas*), Jāzeps Vītols International Piano Competition (*Jāzepa Vītola Starptautiskais pianistu konkurss*) etc. A special place holds the annual international competition Talents of Inese Galante (*Ineses Galantes talanti*), as it aims to discover and nurture emerging talent by providing

a platform for young musicians to be heard and supported in their professional musical careers. The majority of these and other events are linked to Latvia's state-supported music education system, as participation is often an integral part of a student's musical training, particularly within specialized music education institutions or with their support.

The close relationship between musical practice and music education has fostered a comprehensive system that nurtures both artistic proficiency and cultural awareness from early childhood. In Latvia, cultural education (*kultūrizglītība*) occupies a prominent and well-established position within the broader educational framework. As stated in the Cultural Policy Guidelines 2022-2027 "Cultural State",

"the cornerstone of a cultural education system is vocationally oriented cultural education focused on talent development that involves a large number of learners, thereby allowing to identify and deliberately develop new talents" (Ministru kabinets 2022).

This means that the cultural education system has a significant impact on the cultural, professional, and psychosocial development of young people. It not only supports the development of individual musical skills but also serves as a vital means of preserving and transmitting national identity as well as cultural continuity.

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The cultural education system includes vocationally oriented, secondary vocational, and higher vocational education programs in various fields of the creative industries within the thematic area of education titled "Arts" (*Mākslas*), including music, dance, visual arts, design and applied arts, and more (LNKC 2021). The policy was developed by the Latvian Ministry of Culture (*Latvijas Kultūras ministrija*), while its implementation is administered by the Latvian National Centre for Culture (LNKC, *Latvijas Nacionālais kultūras centrs*). Cultural education in Latvia is delivered through a network of institutions founded by the Latvian State, municipal governments, and private educational institutions. It can be acquired through formal education, delivered via structured education programs within accredited institutions, as well as through non-formal education, which includes interest-based activities such as extracurricular clubs, youth centres, courses, seminars etc.

According to data provided by LNKC, a total of 151 educational institutions in Latvia implemented accredited vocationally oriented education programs in 2024–2025. These included 7 state-founded, 135 municipal, and 9 privately established institutions, involving 28,237 enrolled learners (LNKC 2024). Within secondary vocational cultural education, there were 23 educational institutions, comprising 18 state-founded, 3 municipal, and 2 private educational entities operating in the thematic area of "Arts", educating a total of 4,452 learners.

An important role in cultural education is played by the "Latvian School Bag Program" (*Latvijas skolas soma*), a nationwide, state-funded cultural educational initiative (LNKC n.d.a.). The program was launched in the 2018–2019 academic year as part of the Latvian centenary celebrations, and since 2022 it has been administered by LNKC.

It offers every student in Latvia – from the beginning of primary to the end of secondary education, in both general and vocational education – the opportunity to attend high-quality cultural and art events free of charge as part of the educational curriculum. Therefore, it promotes cultural awareness, promotes a sense of national identity and belonging through cultural values, enhances educational outcomes, as well as reduces socio-economic inequalities. In addition, as stated in the program’s research report covering the years 2018–2023, participation in artistic events contributes to the psychosocial development of youth. It promotes emotional well-being and mental health, and supports the resolution of important social issues among young people, especially in light of the harmful consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic and recent geopolitical developments (LNKC n.d.b.).

2.2. An overview of vocational music education programs in Latvia

Vocational education in art comprises various educational programs with the unifying name Music and the Performance Art (*Mūzika un skatuves māksla*). The music education framework is both well-established and distinctive, characterized by an extensive nationwide network of music schools and a multi-level structure spanning early childhood through higher education. Notably, music education is predominantly financed by the state, though parental co-payments may be necessary depending on municipal contributions. Vocational music education in Latvia is a fundamental component of cultural education, bridging long-standing traditions with contemporary educational practices. It is regulated by the state, and it is voluntary. The framework of the vocational education in general is governed by the Vocational Education Law (*Profesionālās izglītības likums*) aligned with European standards.

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Specifically in the context of music education, three levels of vocational education must be highlighted:

- 1) vocationally oriented education (*profesionālās ievirzes izglītība*);
- 2) vocational secondary education (*profesionālā vidējā izglītība*);
- 3) vocational higher education (*profesionālā augstākā izglītība*).

Since adolescence typically covers the age range of approximately 12 to 20 years, the following will focus on the levels of basic and secondary education.

According to Regulation No. 762 in the State Standard for Vocationally Oriented Education in the Arts – including music, art, and dance – the aim of vocationally oriented education is to develop learner’s talents and skills in the chosen field of art, as well as to provide opportunities to acquire professional competencies for continuing education at a higher level (Ministru kabinets 2023). There are two educational programs within vocationally oriented education: **20V** and **30V**.

The program 20V represents the first step towards professional music education. It is delivered concurrently with general basic education. Pupils around the age of

seven, typically in grade 1 or 2 in general school, are admitted to this program with or without prior musical knowledge. During the admission process, applicants usually are assessed for their sensitivity to pitch and rhythm, as well as their ability to repeat simple melodic and rhythmic patterns.

In 2024–2025, 23 different educational programs were offered, including instrument playing as well as choral singing, contemporary rhythm music and even rock music. Throughout their studies, pupils develop musical perception, creativity, and general intellectual and analytical skills related to music, through both group and individual lessons. The program lasts eight years. Upon completion, pupils receive a certificate of vocationally oriented education and are eligible to continue their studies at the next level of vocational education.

The program 30V is delivered concurrently with secondary education in another educational institution. In this program, pupils are admitted with prior musical experience, typically at the age of 16. During the 2024–2025 academic year, 24 different educational programs were offered, including all of the previously mentioned programs, with the addition of solo singing. The duration of this educational program is three years. By completing the program, pupils receive a diploma of vocational secondary education and may proceed to the next level of vocational studies, most commonly, at the Jazeps Vitols Latvian Academy of Music (JVLMA, *Jāzeps Vītola Latvijas Mūzikas akadēmija*).

According to Regulation No. 332 in the State Standard for Vocational Secondary Education, the strategic goal of vocational educational programs is to prepare learners for professional careers by equipping them with specific skills, knowledge, qualification, and attitudes that enhance employability and adaptability to changing socio-economic conditions. These programs also aim to support personal growth, civic engagement, and contribute to competitiveness, sustainability, and innovation both in Latvia and across Europe (Ministru kabinets 2020).

Program 33, implemented in specialized music schools for musically gifted individuals, plays an important role in nurturing musical talent and supporting the professional development of young musicians. This highly selective program integrates intensive music education with a comprehensive general education curriculum. Admission to this program requires applicants to have completed basic education and have prior musical experience. In addition, candidates must pass an entrance examination, usually consisting of two parts: a performance assessment in their chosen specialization and an evaluation of their music theory knowledge. The duration of this educational program is three or four years.

A key feature of the program is the emphasis on individual instruction. This is complemented by classes in music theory disciplines, typically delivered in small groups up to 10–12 pupils. As a result, the program ensures both individual artistic growth and professional preparation through a highly specialized and student-centred curriculum. During their studies, learners receive a scholarship based on their academic

performance. Additionally, some schools provide accommodation in dormitories for those students who come from more remote areas of Latvia. These two aspects provide both financial and social support, allowing students to focus more on their learning and personal development. Also, this reduces socio-economic barriers and geographical inequalities, enabling pupils from all regions of Latvia to access education in these schools.

Upon completion of this program, students are awarded a diploma of vocational secondary education and obtain a professional qualification in their chosen specialisation. Graduates may pursue employment in the arts field and / or continue their studies at a higher music education institution, most commonly at the JVLMA.

2.3. Summary

Music education in Latvia is extensive and multifaceted, playing a vital role in strengthening national identity and preserving cultural heritage. Predominantly state-funded, it is delivered through a well-structured and diverse system that includes both interest-based education and vocational education. As such, the system is designed to be accessible and inclusive, ensuring that children and adolescents from diverse socio-economic backgrounds and geographical areas have the opportunity to develop their musical talents and pursue professional pathways in music. This comprehensive and uniquely structured framework provides a strong foundation and a supportive environment for nurturing young people. Moreover, it presents a valuable context for academic exploration of musical development within the psychosocial dimensions during adolescence.

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CONCLUSION AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

This article is the first to highlight the need for further research on the role of psychosocial skills in (gifted) education. In Latvia, as in many other countries, psychosocial skills have not been systematically integrated into educational curricula. Only in recent years has this issue begun to receive increased attention through various training courses, workshops, surveys, and educational initiatives.

The educational system should not only focus on the development of academic or professional competence but also integrate psychosocial support as a core component of the curriculum at all stages. This is particularly important in gifted education, especially during the critical developmental period of adolescence. At this stage, students often exhibit heightened sensitivity, face intense workloads, and encounter various personal, academic, and professional challenges – such as maintaining motivation and perseverance, managing self-discipline and competition, coping with setbacks, and dealing with performance-related issues, including performance anxiety.

Undoubtedly, teachers must initially complete various courses and seminars to acquire the necessary competencies. Since the topic is relatively new in Latvia, it would be beneficial to invite the appropriate specialists or offer exchange programs abroad, allowing teachers to gain new skills and experiences. On one hand, social well-being and a sense of belonging could be nurtured through various social activities, such as group music performances, debates, or collaborative projects. On the other hand, it is equally important to focus on developing emotional and physical health. Therefore, it would be valuable to introduce new courses, such as various types of therapy or self-care practices, or at least integrate relevant components into existing curricula. These could include stress management, emotional regulation, as well as body awareness, breathing techniques, among others.

This requires joint collaboration among stakeholders, as well as in-depth scientific research, the results of which could – and should – be integrated into practice. Therefore, it is hoped that psychosocial competence could introduce a new dimension to education, particularly within the unique Latvian music education system as a nurturing environment for talent development. Such efforts would contribute to holistic personal growth and support mental health alongside cultivating academic and professional skills.

In conclusion, this paper highlights key aspects of the concept of psychosocial skills, with particular attention to their relevance in adolescence. Additionally, by examining the Latvian music education system, the study identifies strengths and challenges that may contribute to future directions. As such, it provides a conceptual foundation for further empirical research and practical implementation.

LIMITATIONS

Despite the contributions to the field, the present article is constrained by certain limitations. First, it employs a non-empirical design, aiming to contextualize the current situation and highlight key conceptual perspectives. Therefore, future empirical research is necessary to validate the proposed arguments and to examine their applicability within diverse educational settings. It must also be acknowledged that several enablers must be considered and addressed, including staffing, teacher capacity, and the availability of specialized training. Additionally, issues related to resources, funding, curriculum flexibility, and institutional support are essential for the effective implementation of such initiatives.

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