

Inclusive Music Education for Students with Disabilities: A Mini Review

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ABSTRACT

Inclusive music education has gained increasing attention as part of broader efforts to ensure equitable access to education for students with disabilities. However, persistent tensions remain between formal access and meaningful participation in music learning contexts. This mini review adopts a structured narrative review approach to synthesise recent literature on the conceptual, pedagogical, and technological developments shaping inclusive music education. The review identifies three dominant orientations within the field: special education approaches, inclusive mainstream practices, and transformative disability-informed perspectives that challenge ableist assumptions in music pedagogy. In addition, it critically examines the role of policy frameworks, teacher preparedness, and emerging innovations such as Accessible Digital Musical Instruments and Universal Design for Learning. Findings indicate that while inclusive music education holds significant potential in fostering participation, identity formation, and social engagement, its implementation remains uneven due to systemic constraints, limited pedagogical translation, and insufficient teacher preparation. This study argues that inclusive music education should move beyond accommodation toward a reconceptualisation of musical ability, pedagogy, and participation. By synthesising fragmented perspectives into a coherent analytical framework, this review contributes to advancing a more critically informed and practice-oriented discourse in inclusive music education.

Keywords: Inclusive music education; disability; Universal Design for Learning; assistive technology; music pedagogy; equity

INTRODUCTION

Music education for students with disabilities has evolved significantly over the past decades, moving from segregated models of instruction toward more inclusive and participatory paradigms. Historically, students with disabilities were often excluded from mainstream music programmes or positioned within parallel instructional systems that reinforced deficit-oriented assumptions about ability (Hammel & Hourigan, 2024; Jellison, 2015). Contemporary perspectives, however, emphasise the right of all learners to access and participate in meaningful musical experiences within shared educational contexts. This shift is closely linked to broader developments in educational policy and disability rights. Legislative frameworks such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and Section 504 have established the legal foundation for inclusive practices (Crockett, 2017; Darrow & Adamek, 2017).

However, increasing scholarships suggests that legal access does not necessarily translate into equitable participation, as structural, pedagogical, and cultural barriers continue to limit engagement (Mommo et al., 2025; Siegal, 2026). This reveals an ongoing tension between policy discourse and classroom realities, raising critical questions about whether inclusion in music education is substantively achieved or merely administratively enacted. This tension suggests that inclusion in music education may function less as a transformative practice and more as a policy ideal that is unevenly realised across contexts.

Despite the growing body of scholarship, existing literature remains fragmented across disciplinary, pedagogical, and theoretical boundaries, with limited integration between conceptual discussions and classroom practice. As a result, there is a need for a structured synthesis that not only maps the field but also critically interrogates the relationship between policy, pedagogy, and lived educational realities. This study addresses this gap by offering a focused mini review that consolidates key perspectives while highlighting key tensions shaping inclusive music education. In particular, it adopts the tension between access and meaningful participation as a central analytical lens for interpreting the existing literature.

METHODOLOGY OF THE REVIEW

This study adopts a structured narrative mini review design, which is appropriate for synthesising interdisciplinary and conceptually diverse fields such as inclusive music education. Narrative reviews provide flexibility in integrating theoretical perspectives and identifying emerging patterns across heterogeneous studies, while systematic reviews follow more rigid and protocol-driven procedures (Augustine & Lucas, 2026). The review focuses on literature published between 2015 and 2026, capturing recent developments in inclusive music education. Relevant sources were identified through database searches, including Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar, which are widely recognised as comprehensive platforms for academic literature retrieval and analysis (Valente et al., 2022; Mezquita et al., 2025).

Keywords used in the search process included inclusive music education, disability, music pedagogy, Universal Design for Learning, and assistive technology. Inclusion criteria prioritised peer-reviewed journal articles, book chapters, and key theoretical contributions relevant to pedagogical, conceptual, and technological dimensions of inclusive music education. Consistent with established approaches in evidence synthesis, studies were selected based on relevance, recency, and conceptual contribution rather than exhaustive coverage (Baheti & Joshi, 2025). The analysis followed a thematic synthesis approach, in which selected literature was systematically examined to identify recurring patterns, conceptual orientations, and critical tensions across studies. Findings were organised into thematic categories to facilitate interpretive analysis and conceptual integration (Stern et al., 2026).

Rather than aiming for statistical generalisation, this mini review emphasises analytical depth and conceptual clarity, contributing to a more integrated understanding of inclusive music education as an evolving and contested field. This approach is particularly suited to emerging fields such as inclusive music education, where conceptual plurality and contextual variability require interpretive synthesis rather than rigid standardisation.

Conceptualising Inclusive Music Education

Inclusive music education can be understood through three interconnected perspectives. First, special education approaches focus on adapting instruction to meet individual needs, often through individualized education plans and modified assessment strategies (Darrow & Adamek, 2017). Second, inclusive education models emphasise the integration of students with disabilities into mainstream classrooms, supported by differentiated instruction and collaborative pedagogies such as co-teaching and peer interaction (Mommo et al., 2025). More recently, a third perspective has emerged, informed by disability studies, which criticize traditional inclusion as insufficient. This transformative approach challenges ableist assumptions and calls for a redefinition of musical ability and participation (Draper, 2024). The “label-free” philosophy proposed by Hammel and Hourigan (2024) further reinforces this shift, arguing that categorising students primarily through disability labels risks reinforcing marginalisation rather than supporting meaningful learning. Taken together, these perspectives indicate that inclusive music education is not merely a matter of placement or instructional adaptation, but a contested and evolving construct shaped by competing epistemologies of ability, participation, and musical value. The coexistence of these orientations reflects underlying tensions between deficit-based, integrative, and transformative paradigms. Table 1 summarises these perspectives and situates them along an access–participation continuum, highlighting their differing assumptions about inclusion.

Table 1. Key Perspectives and Themes in Inclusive Music Education

Perspective	Key Focus	Pedagogical Orientation	Critical Issues Identified	Position on Access-Participation Continuum	Key References
Special Education Approach	Individual adaptation and support for students with disabilities	Individualized instruction (IEP), modified assessment	Risk of deficit framing; reinforces separation from mainstream practices	Primarily access-oriented (focus on support and accommodation)	Darrow & Adamek (2017); Crockett (2017); Sobol (2011)
Inclusive Education Approach	Integration of students with disabilities into mainstream music classrooms	Differentiated instruction, co-teaching, peer interaction	Inclusion often limited to physical placement rather than meaningful participation	Transitional: access → partial participation	Mommo et al. (2025); Berger & Milić (2023); Siegal (2026)
Transformative / Disability-Informed Approach	Rethinking musical ability, identity, and participation	Label-free pedagogy, socially responsive teaching	Challenges ableism but remains under-implemented in practice	Primarily participation-oriented (focus on agency and identity)	Draper (2024); Hammel & Hourigan (2024); Austin-Stewart (2024); Casanovas (2025)
Technological & UDL-Oriented Approach	Expanding access through tools and flexible design	ADMI, digital tools, Universal Design for Learning (UDL)	Risk of prioritising access over meaningful engagement	Enables access, but participation depends on pedagogical integration	Duarte et al. (2023); Yinger et al. (2023); Wong (2025); Di Paolo & Todino (2025); Hersh et al. (2020)
Social Inclusion & Equity Perspective	Music as a tool for social participation and belonging	Culturally responsive and inclusive practices	Inclusion shaped by broader inequalities (e.g., disability, migration, socio-economic status)	Emphasises participation within socio-cultural context	Crawford (2017, 2020); Thompson et al. (2025)

These perspectives can also be interpreted through the tension between access and meaningful participation. While special and inclusive education approaches often prioritise access through placement and adaptation, transformative perspectives shift the focus toward rethinking participation itself, highlighting the limitations of access-based inclusion.

Pedagogical and Theoretical Foundations

As illustrated in Table 1, inclusive music education is not a unified framework but a field characterised by multiple, and sometimes competing, perspectives. The pedagogical foundations of inclusive music education are increasingly informed by social and ecological theories of learning. The work of Lev Vygotsky emphasises the role of scaffolding and social interaction in cognitive development, while Urie Bronfenbrenner highlights the influence of environmental systems on learning processes (Moreno et al., 2021). These perspectives suggest that inclusion requires not only individual adaptation but also the restructuring of learning

environments and social relations within which musical learning is situated. In practice, frameworks such as Universal Design for Learning (UDL) have gained prominence as a means of operationalising inclusive pedagogy. Empirical studies demonstrate that UDL-based environments can enhance students' engagement, social interaction, and sense of representation in music learning contexts (Yinger et al., 2023; Wong, 2025). However, systematic reviews indicate that implementation remains uneven, with inclusion often interpreted narrowly as physical integration rather than meaningful pedagogical transformation (Mommo et al., 2025).

This highlights a critical issue: while theoretical frameworks for inclusion are well-established, their translation into classroom practice remains inconsistent, suggesting a gap between pedagogical ideals and enactment. However, while frameworks such as Universal Design for Learning provide a conceptual bridge between inclusion and pedagogy, their implementation often remains procedural rather than transformative. In many classroom contexts, UDL is reduced to strategies of differentiation or accommodation without fundamentally rethinking musical goals, assessment criteria, or participation structures. This suggests that the challenge of inclusive music education lies not only in adopting new frameworks, but in reconfiguring pedagogical decision-making and redefining what counts as musical competence and success. From this perspective, the distinction between access and participation becomes critical, as pedagogical frameworks such as UDL may facilitate entry into learning environments but do not automatically ensure meaningful musical engagement or agency.

Technological and Pedagogical Innovations

Technological advancements have significantly expanded possibilities for inclusive music education. Accessible Digital Musical Instruments (ADMIs) enable students with diverse physical and sensory abilities to engage in music-making through alternative interaction modes, thereby challenging traditional conceptions of musical performance (Duarte et al., 2023). Beyond instrument design, digital tools and edugames have been identified as key enablers of inclusive learning, supporting cognitive development, communication, and social interaction among students with special educational needs (Di Paolo & Todino, 2025). Similarly, ICT-based approaches have demonstrated potential in facilitating multimodal engagement and participation (Hersh et al., 2020).

However, emerging scholarship cautions against viewing technology as inherently inclusive. Without critical pedagogical integration, technological solutions may reproduce existing inequities by prioritising access over meaningful engagement. This concern is further reinforced by research in disability aesthetics, which argues that inclusion should not merely adapt individuals to dominant musical norms but instead challenge and expand those norms themselves (Austin-Stewart, 2024; Casanovas, 2025). Thus, technological innovation must be understood not as a solution in itself, but as part of a broader reconfiguration of musical practice, aesthetics, and pedagogy. These reframing positions inclusion not as a technical adjustment, but as a critical intervention into dominant musical norms and values.

Importantly, the effectiveness of technological innovations depends on the extent to which they are pedagogically embedded and contextually responsive. Without alignment to learning objectives, teacher expertise, and classroom realities, technologies such as ADMIs risk functioning as isolated interventions rather than integrated components of inclusive practice. This reinforces the need to position technology within a broader pedagogical and socio-cultural framework, rather than treating it as a standalone solution. This reinforces the broader tension identified in this review: while technology can enhance access to music-making, it does not inherently guarantee meaningful participation unless it is embedded within inclusive pedagogical practices.

Challenges and Limitations

Despite conceptual and technological progress, several challenges persist in the implementation of inclusive music education. A major concern is teacher preparedness, as many music educators report insufficient training in inclusive practices and limited access to appropriate resources (Berger & Milić, 2023; Hammel & Hourigan, 2024). This reflects a broader systemic issue in teacher education, where inclusive pedagogy is often positioned as an additional competency rather than a foundational component of professional training. As a

result, teachers may be equipped with theoretical awareness but lack the practical confidence and pedagogical strategies required to facilitate meaningful inclusion in music classrooms.

Furthermore, a critical limitation across the literature is the limited representation of student voice, particularly the lived experiences of learners with disabilities. The absence of these perspectives restricts understanding of how inclusion is perceived, negotiated, and experienced in practice, thereby reinforcing a top-down approach to inclusive education. Addressing this gap is essential for developing more participatory, context-sensitive, and learner-centred approaches.

In addition, systemic barriers continue to affect participation. Students with disabilities remain underrepresented in music programmes, indicating that inclusion is often more aspirational than fully realised (Siegal, 2026). Similar patterns of exclusion are observed among other marginalised groups, suggesting that inclusion in music education is embedded within broader socio-cultural and institutional inequalities (Crawford, 2017, 2020). These structural constraints limit opportunities for sustained engagement and meaningful participation, even in contexts where access has been formally established.

Research in higher education contexts further reveals that disability is frequently addressed in generalised or administrative terms, without adequately considering the diversity of students lived experiences (Thompson et al., 2025). This “hidden diversity” highlights the need to move beyond compliance-based models of inclusion toward more relational, responsive, and contextually grounded practices. Taken together, these challenges underscore a central issue identified in this review: achieving access alone is insufficient, and meaningful participation remains unevenly realised across educational contexts.

Implications for Practice

The findings of this review have important implications for music educators and practitioners. First, inclusive practice should move beyond ensuring access to the intentional design of learning environments that prioritise meaningful participation, student agency, and the development of musical identity. This requires rethinking not only instructional strategies but also the underlying assumptions about musical ability and success, as highlighted in recent discussions on inclusive and disability-informed pedagogy (Draper, 2024; Hammel & Hourigan, 2024).

Second, teachers require more than technical knowledge of inclusive strategies; they need critical pedagogical awareness of how their instructional decisions shape opportunities for participation. This includes the ability to adapt teaching approaches, facilitate collaborative learning, and respond to diverse learner needs in dynamic classroom contexts, which has been identified as a key challenge in inclusive music education practice (Berger & Milić, 2023; Mommo et al., 2025).

Finally, the integration of technologies such as Accessible Digital Musical Instruments (ADMI) should be guided by pedagogical intent rather than technological availability. While such tools can expand access, their effectiveness depends on how they are embedded within meaningful musical experiences (Duarte et al., 2023; Hersh et al., 2020). As such, technology should be understood as an enabler of participation, rather than a substitute for inclusive pedagogy.

CONCLUSION

Inclusive music education represents a significant shift in how music teaching and learning are conceptualised. However, this review demonstrates that inclusion remains a contested and incomplete project, shaped by persistent tensions between policy and practice, access and meaningful participation, and adaptation and transformation. While policy frameworks and technological innovations have expanded opportunities for access, they do not guarantee meaningful engagement. This highlights a central argument of this review: that inclusive music education must move beyond access-oriented approaches toward a deeper rethinking of participation, pedagogy, and musical values.

By synthesising diverse perspectives, this study contributes to the field by framing inclusive music education as a critical and practice-oriented agenda rather than a purely policy-driven initiative. The findings suggest that advancing inclusion requires bridging the gap between conceptual frameworks and classroom enactment, with greater attention to teacher practice, learner experience, and socio-cultural context. Future research should therefore prioritise classroom-based inquiry, participatory approaches involving students with disabilities, and contextually grounded innovations that challenge dominant assumptions about musical ability and learning. In doing so, inclusive music education can move toward becoming a more coherent, equitable, and genuinely participatory practice.

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Ethical Approval

Not applicable. This study is based on a review of existing literature and does not involve human or animal participants.

Data Availability Statement

No new data was created or analysed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Research Contribution

This mini review contributes to the field of music education by synthesising diverse and fragmented perspectives on inclusive music education for students with disabilities. It offers a critical framework that highlights key conceptual tensions, pedagogical challenges, and emerging directions, thereby providing a foundation for future research and practice in inclusive and socially just music education.

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