




# The Development of Soft Skills through Music in Educational Contexts: A Systematic Review

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**Abstract:** Numerous scientific studies confirm that music is a tool to improve and develop interpersonal skills. These skills, such as leadership, teamwork, communication, interpersonal skills, or coordination, are essential at present and their acquisition is necessary to adapt to a constantly changing society. The aim of this study is to analyze the contribution of music to the development of soft skills in educational contexts. To achieve the objective of the study, a systematic review of the last five years was carried out to find the existing empirical evidence. Among the main results, we observed that soft skills improve when they are developed through music in educational contexts, concluding that educational interventions with music allow for participants to develop these skills.

**Keywords:** soft skills; music education; music; transversal competencies; music



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## 1. Introduction

At present, it is essential to develop soft skills that enable people to relate and adapt to the needs and demands of an ever-changing society. These skills provide people with the necessary tools to face challenges both at work and in their daily lives, fostering their adaptability, success, and overall well-being. Authors such as Gutman and Schoon [1] classify soft skills specifically, referring to them as those related to teamwork, communication, leadership, self-management, interpersonal relations or creativity. The OECD [2] states that the definition of soft skills, in addition to including the characteristics of transversal competencies, goes further by determining that these skills are of an interpersonal nature, being intangible skills that are not of a technical nature.

Soft skills function as a complement to technical skills [3] and their acquisition is ideal in educational contexts [4], as they are easily acquired and teachable, avoiding a limited perspective based solely on technical or cognitive competencies [5]. These transversal competencies are extremely valuable for a changing social and productive model, as they transcend disciplinary boundaries [6].

The importance of these competencies and their study over time has led to the existence of numerous definitions to determine what exactly soft skills are, which has led to a variety of interpretations [7]. This problem has made it impossible to reach a consensus in the scientific community due to the existence of very different definitions [8–10]. In this study, we define soft skills as a set of personal qualities, habits, and social attitudes that promote personal and professional success [11].

It has been shown that music is an artistic expression that, from childhood, facilitates the socialization of individuals and allows for the establishment of a communicative expression in a more effective and immediate way compared to other systems, such as

creative writing, sculpture, painting, theater or cinema, since each subject possesses skills that allow for him/her to actively participate in the musical act [12].

It is interesting to note that there are numerous studies that show the importance of integrating music in educational contexts as a crucial element for the acquisition of soft skills in students [13].

In addition, to music, the integration of the arts in the school curriculum fosters creativity and imagination, as well as numerous cognitive and emotional skills [14].

Teachers recognize that the practice of musical activities works more effectively on issues related to self-control, practice, teamwork, commitment, or flexibility [15], while belonging to a choir, band or musical group allows for the development of coordination and teamwork skills [16].

The socioemotional benefits perceived by adolescents who participate in choral, or wind ensembles have been demonstrated, and it can be affirmed that collective musical practice is related to aesthetic pleasure or socio-affective relationships [17].

Although there is evidence that music can have a positive effect on the development of soft skills, it is necessary to further investigate how music is currently used for the development of these skills in educational contexts, since this analysis could contribute to the provision of valuable information for the design of more effective music education programs adapted to the needs of different groups.

Therefore, the aim of this study is to systematically analyze the contribution of music from the last five years to the development of soft skills in educational contexts.

To carry out our analysis, we asked ourselves two research questions:

Q1. What are the soft skills that are most developed through music?

Q2. What are the characteristics of studies based on bibliometric indicators?

Q3. What are the characteristics of educational interventions that promote the development of soft skills through music?

## 2. Materials and Methods

This systematic review aims to analyze and interpret the available and relevant research on a topic area or phenomenon of interest [18] in this case, the contribution of music to the development of soft skills.

The approach of this research is interpretative, with a retrospective design that allows for the available studies to be obtained, analyzed, and interpreted [19].

The bibliographic search was carried out between September and December 2022. The databases used to locate the different documents were SCOPUS and Web of Science. The search equation with the best results corresponded to the fields of article title, abstract, and keywords of the following terms: (soft skills) OR (Leadership OR Teamwork) AND (Music\*). The fact that we also used the terms teamwork or leadership is based on the terminology used by the validated instrument Teamwork Skills Questionnaire (TSQ) [20]. This questionnaire is a tool for the indirect measurement of transversal teamwork skills used in different contexts [20,21].

### 2.1. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

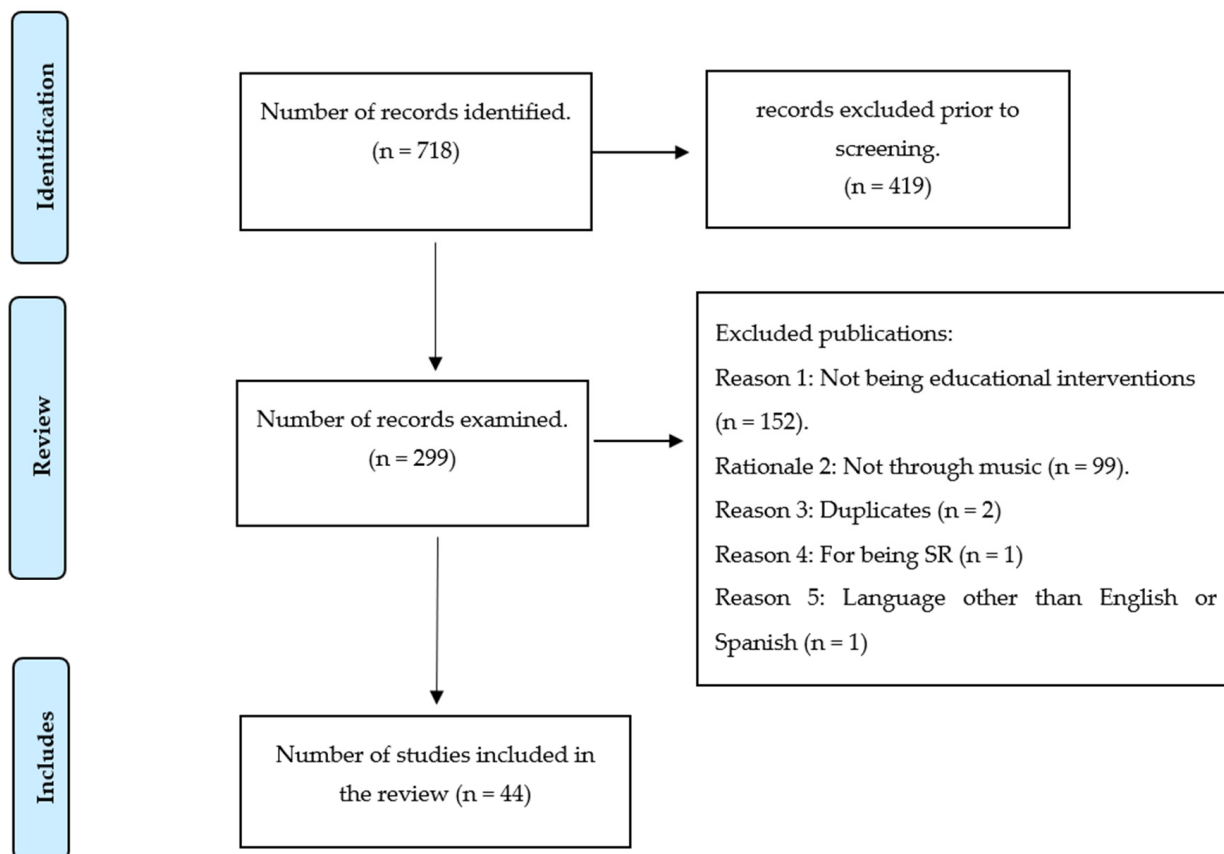
First, the search was filtered to the last 5 years (2017–2022) to obtain the most recent scientific evidence. The initial search yielded a total of 299 articles, after first excluding 2 articles for being duplicates, 1 for being a systematic review and 1 for not being published in English or Spanish.

To be included in the review, the articles had to be educational interventions that used music to improve or develop soft skills.

During the analysis the articles, 152 articles were excluded because, although they established relationships between soft skills and music, they were not educational interventions, and another 99 were excluded because they were interventions that worked on the acquisition or improvement of soft skills, but not through music. Therefore, the

final number of excluded articles was 255. Therefore, a total of 44 articles that met the requirements were included in this study.

In accordance with the above and following the methods used by [22], the following flow chart was created according to the PRISMA standards (Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** PRISMA flowchart of the inclusion and exclusion criteria.

## 2.2. Approach and Data Analysis

After an analysis of the identified studies, we proceeded to divide them into four main categories of analysis that collected data from all the selected articles, as shown in Table 1. The first category establishes a set of bibliometric indicators from which we can obtain information about the authors working in the field, where more research is being conducted on the topic, and which publishers and journals publish on these topics. The next category of analysis focuses on the methodological aspects of the reviewed articles, obtaining information about the number of participants and their age group, as well as the research methodology that was used. Another category of analysis was the type of soft skill that was improved with music in each of the interventions, using Cinque's [8] classification, which distinguishes between social skills, methodological skills, and practical skills. Finally, the characteristics presented by the programs were analyzed. In this case, we first analyzed the type of groups in which the interventions were carried out, dividing them into professional, amateur or semi-professional groups, understanding semi-professional to be the participation of amateur musicians together with professional musicians. Subsequently, the musical specialty that was worked on in the interventions was analyzed, and classified as individual or collective instrumental practice, and vocal or non-performing specialties. The academic field of application was also analyzed, dividing it into formal and non-formal fields, and finally, the benefits of the programs were analyzed according to age.

**Table 1.** Categories and subcategories of the analysis.

Categories	Subcategories	Classification
Bibliometric indicators	Author(s) Geographical location Institution Editorial Magazine	
Methodological aspects	Participants Age group Methodological approach	
Soft skills that improve with music	Intervention skills	Social, methodological and practical
Characteristics of the programs	Application group Musical specialties Academic scope of application Benefits of the programs according to age	Professional, amateur and semi-professional sectors individual or group instrumental practice, voice; non-performance specialties formal or non-formal

To improve the comprehension of the article, we prepared a table (Table 2) in which the skills related to each of the competencies are specified and the subcategories are classified according to the contributions of the analyzed manuscripts, along with their corresponding authors.

**Table 2.** Categorization of competencies for the analysis and list of competencies and authors.

Types of Competencies	Competencies Defined in the Articles Reviewed	Authors
	Positive attitude	(Batt-Rawden and Stedje, 2020)
	Self-efficacy	(Ko, 2022; Abeles et al., 2021).
	Self-esteem	(Isabirye, 2021)
	Autonomy	(Hendry et al., 2022; Isabirye, 2021; Kladder, 2021).
	Self-perception	(Barret and Zhúkov, 2022; Ros-Morente et al. 2019).
	Perception of well-being	(Barret and Zhúkov, 2022; Hendry et al., 2022; Batt-Rawden and Stedje, 2020; Joseph and Southcott, 2020; Lamont et al., 2018; Harrop-Allin, 2017, Mcferran et al., 2017; Guerrero, 2021; Kang, 2019; Lindblad, 2021).
	Communication skills	(Min, 2022; Hendry et al., 2022; Howe, 2022; Dabby, 2021; Bishop and Goebel, 2020; De Prada Creo et al., 2021).
	Commitment	(Mcferran et al., 2017; Gustems-Carnicer et al., 2020).
	Rely on	(O'Donoghue et al., 2021).
	Cooperation	(Gaunt and Treacy, 2020; Cores-Bilbao et al., 2019; Howe, 2022; Saetre and Zhukov, 2021; Legendre and Varela, 2020).
	Creativity	(Howe, 2022)
	Empathy	(Jansson, 2021)
Social skills	Empowerment	(Jansson, 2021)
	Expression	(O'Donoghue et al., 2021).
	Social skills	(Saetre and Zhukov, 2021)
	Social interaction	(Hendry et al., 2022; Valenzuela, 2021; Joseph and Southcott, 2020; MacGregor, 2020; Cores-Bilbao et al., 2019; Clayton et al., 2019; Kladder, 2021).
	Social bonding	(MacGregor, 2020)
	Leadership	(Barret and Zhúkov, 2022; Hendry et al., 2022; Valenzuela, 2021; Kelly and Neidorf, 2021; Weston, 2020; Joseph and Southcott, 2020; Jansson et al., 2019; Vanzella et al., 2019; Lamont et al., 2018; Abeles et al., 2021; Harrop-Allin, 2017; Abramauskienė and Ozarovska, 2017; Sutherland and Cartwright, 2022; Howe, 2022; Jansson et al., 2021; Dabby, 2021; Isabirye, 2021; Ros-Morente et al. 2019; Anderson and Willingham, 2020; Oriola-Requena et al., 2021; Saetre and Zhukov, 2021; Legendre and Varela, 2020; Bishop and Goebel, 2020; Jansson, 2021; De Prada Creo et al., 2021; Shorner-Johnson, 2017; Price, 2021; Oriola et al., 2018).
	Intrinsic motivation	(Ros-Morente et al. 2019)
	Aesthetic pleasure	(Oriola-Requena et al., 2021)
	Interpersonal relationships	(Jansson et al., 2019; Lamont et al., 2018; Oriola-Requena et al., 2021).
	Social responsibility	(Harrop-Allin, 2017; Howe, 2022)
	Sense of responsibility	(Harrop-Allin, 2017)
	Vulnerability	(Jansson, 2021)

Table 2. Cont.

Types of Competencies	Competencies Defined in the Articles Reviewed	Authors
Methodological competencies	Collaboration Check Flexibility	(MacGregor, 2020; Bishop and Goebel, 2020). (Jansson, 2021; Gustems-Carnicer et al., 2020). (Kladder, 2021; Gustems-Carnicer et al., 2020).
	Cultural competencies  Teamwork	(Saetre and Zhukov, 2021) (Ko, 2022; Min, 2022; Treacy and Gaunt, 2021; Gaunt and Treacy, 2020, Howe, 2022; Dabby, 2021; Jansson, 2021; De Prada Creo et al., 2021; Gustems-Carnicer et al., 2020).
Practical skills	Discipline	(Howe, 2022)

### 3. Results

#### 3.1. Bibliometric Results

This section aims to analyze which authors, countries and journals are specialized in this topic, to determine the research trends in this type of study, and to be able to follow up and allow for the scientific community to find updated sources of information on interventions in educational contexts in which soft skills are improved through music. Regarding the geographical location of the studies, 16 different countries were counted. Only those countries that produced more than one article on this topic are shown below. Spain is the country with the highest number of articles ( $n = 7$ ), with 15.9% of the total, followed by Australia ( $n = 6$ ) and the UK ( $n = 6$ ), with 13.6% each, and Norway ( $n = 5$ ) and the USA ( $n = 5$ ), with 11.4%. When analyzed by continent, 25 articles come from European countries (56.8%), 6 from North America (13.6%), 5 from Oceania, representing 11.3% of the total, 2 from Africa (4.5%), 4 from Asia (9.3%), and 2 from South America (4.5%).

There is an enormous diversity of authors in the analyzed articles. However, some of them have more than one piece of research in the field of soft skills and music, as is the case for Gustems-Carnicer, Oriola-Requena, Oriola and Ros-Morente, who each have four articles on this topic. The next most prolific author is Dag Jansson, who appears in a total of three articles. Other authors appear in two articles on this topic, such as Diego Calderón-Garrido, Beate Elstad, Danielle Treacy, Erik Døving, Gemma Filella-Guiu and Helena Gaunt.

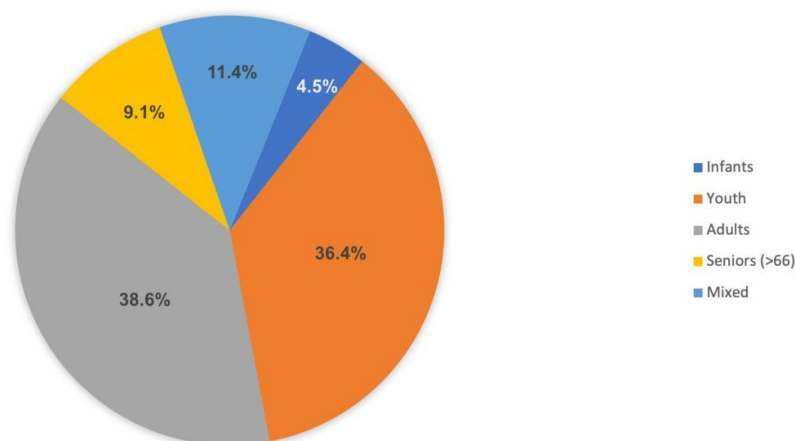
The type of institutions involved in the interventions is varied, such as the arts and culture department of a university, amateur choirs, higher artistic education, different types of educational centers, music schools, general education, or language schools. The most common among all modalities are amateur choirs ( $n = 8$ ), with a percentage of 18.2% of the total, followed by public primary schools ( $n = 6$ ), with a percentage of 13.6%.

As for the journals in which this research is published, there are a total of 30 different journals, with *Music Education Research* ( $n = 5$ ) and *International Society for Music Education* ( $n = 5$ ) each representing 11.4%, and *Frontiers in Psychology* ( $n = 4$ ) representing a percentage of 9.1% of the total.

#### 3.2. Methodological Aspects

In terms of participants, one study, with a large sample, with a total of 1001 participants, stands out in the results [23], and 8 other studies contained a sample of between 600 and 685 participants [15–17,24–28]. The majority of analyzed articles had a sample containing participants who were <40 years old, representing 47.7% of the total.

Regarding the age range of the studies, they were divided into five intervals: infants (0–11 years), adolescents (12–17 years), adults (18–65 years), and elderly (>66 years). Studies that analyzed more than one age interval were classified as a mixed interval. According to this classification, 2 studies were conducted with infants (4.5%), 16 studies with adolescents (36.4%), 17 studies with adults (38.6%), 4 studies with the elderly (9.1%), and 5 studies were mixed (11.4%) (Figure 2).



**Figure 2.** Distribution of study participants according to age group.

Regarding the methodological approach, 6 studies used a quantitative methodology (13.6%), 34 were qualitative (77.3%) and 4 were mixed (9.1%).

### 3.3. Characteristics of the Programs

#### 3.3.1. Target Group of the Intervention

Regarding the target group, 12 of the interventions (27.3%) focus on the professional sector, i.e., the intervention was carried out on musicians who practice music as a profession [15,24–26,29–36]. In 31 of the studies (70.4%), the interventions were carried out in a lay group. This group consisted of people who had no musical training and used music for a playful purpose [12,16,17,23,27,28,37–61], and only 1 study (2.3%) took place in a semiprofessional setting in which professional and amateur musicians participated in the same intervention [62].

#### 3.3.2. Musical Specialties Involved

A total of 5 interventions (11.4%) were performed by soloists playing an instrument. In the same proportion, a total of 5 (11.4%) were interventions in which the instrumental practice was collective.

Next, activities using the voice were grouped, with a total of 13 interventions (29.5%) performed by choirs.

Finally, we analyzed the interventions of those non-performing musical specialties that represent most of the analyzed studies, with a total of 21 (47.7%), these being composition, pedagogy, music therapy or improvisation.

#### 3.3.3. Academic Setting

The formal academic environment is understood as that which takes place in general education centers, compulsory studies, and specific educational institutions for music education. A total of 52.3% of the interventions ( $n = 23$ ) take place in this type of environment, while 47.7% are established in non-formal contexts ( $n = 21$ ); that is, they refer to activities for music amateurs, such as courses outside the academic environment, socio-cultural centers, or other entities of inclusion of the general population in different social environments.

#### 3.3.4. Benefits of Age-Related Programs

There are numerous benefits of intervention programs through music according to the age of the participants, as shown in Table 3, in which we can observe the benefits and improvements of the interventions according to the age group and the items to which they correspond. We observe that the age group of those considered infants (0–11 years) improves the soft skills related only to leadership, while in the group of adolescents (12–17 years), the following are improved: well-being, teamwork, communication, social interaction, cooperation, leadership, self-perception, aesthetic pleasure, and social skills.



The adult group (18–65 years) improved soft skills related to: self-efficacy, leadership, self-control, teamwork, coordination, and social relations. In the group called seniors (>66 years), the soft skills that most improved relate to well-being, leadership, and social relations. Finally, we analyze those interventions where the age groups are mixed, which we called mixed; in this group, the soft skills that improved are: leadership, communication and creativity.

**Table 3.** Benefits of the programs according to age.

Age Groups	Benefits and Improvements	Authors
Infants (0–11 years)	Leadership	Abramauskienė and Ozarovska (2017).
Youth (12–17 years old)	Welfare	Guerrero Bar (2021)
	Teamwork, communication	De Prada Creo et al. (2021)
	Teamwork	Gaunt and Treacy (2020)
	Welfare	Kang (2019)
	social interaction	Kladder (2021)
	Cooperation, leadership	Legendre and Varela (2020)
	Cooperation, leadership	MacGregor (2020)
	Welfare	McFerran et al. (2017).
	Teamwork, communication	Min (2022)
	Communication	O'Donoghue et al. (2021).
	Leadership	Oriola et al. (2018).
	Aesthetic pleasure	Oriola-Requena et al., (2021)
	Self-perception	Ros-Morente et al. (2019).
Social skills	Saetre and Zhukov (2021)	
Leadership	Shorner-Johnson (2017).	
Leadership	Sutherland and Cartwright (2022)	
Soft skills in general	Weston (2020)	
Adults (18–65 years old)	Self-efficacy	Abeles et al. (2021)
	Leadership	Anderson and Willingham (2020)
	Collaboration, leadership	Bishop and Goebel (2020)
	Leadership, teamwork	Dabby (2021)
	Self-control, teamwork	Gustems-Carnicer et al. (2020).
	Leadership	Harrop-Allin (2017)
	Social relations, coordination	Clayton et al. (2019).
	Cooperation, social action	Cores-Bilbao et al. (2019).
	Leadership	Isabirye (2021)
	Self-control,	Jansson (2021)
	Social Relationships	Jansson et al. (2019).
	Leadership	Jansson, et al. (2021).
	Teamwork	Treacy and Gaunt (2021)
Leadership	Kelly and Neidorf (2021)	
Teamwork	Ko (2022)	
Leadership, social relations	Valenzuela (2021)	
Leadership	Vanzella et al. (2019).	
Seniors (>66)	Welfare	Batt-Rawden and Stedje (2020)
	Wellness, leadership	Joseph and Southcott, (2020)
	Social Relationships	Lamont et al. (2018).
	Welfare	Lindblad (2021)
Mixed	Leadership	Barret and Zhukov (2022)
	Leadership	Hendry et al. (2022)
	Communication	Díaz Abraham et al. (2022)
	Creativity, leadership	Howe (2022)
	Leadership	Price (2021)

### 3.4. Soft Skills Improved by Music

The following section provides a detailed analysis of the soft skills that music helps to improve, based on the classification made by Cinque [8].

### 3.4.1. Social Skills

Music enables the development of social skills in individuals in certain settings [31,32,46,62], mostly through participation in choral ensembles [25,45,52,60], through participation in traditional music groups [48], or through participation in music education programs [51]. Additionally, it promotes interaction between subjects by improving communication strategies [16,29,33,41–43,46,49,51,53,61].

Leadership is another skill that is improved through music, mainly through participation in choral ensembles [39], through participation in instrumental ensembles [17,42], through musical and didactic activities at the preschool level [15,37] (or through the teaching of musical language [56]). In this regard, not only do participants in educational interventions benefit, but music teachers' leadership skills and responsibilities as managers of musical activities are also enhanced [24,35,38,58].

Other soft skills that improve with music interventions include engagement [15,54], self-efficacy [24,47], responsibility [31], empathy [25] creativity [46], and increased self-confidence [55].

In addition to improvements in social skills, music also allows for the development of psychological variables such as self-esteem [48], personal empowerment [25], aesthetic sense or pleasure [17], intrinsic motivation [15], self-confidence [25], or communicative expression [55].

Authors such as Kang [50] claim that participation in musical ensembles increases well-being, while others argue that it is the music itself that increases participants' perceptions of well-being [12,39,44,45,49,52,54,57].

In adult subjects participating in formative activities, singing has been shown to reduce restlessness and increase comfort, well-being, and joy [12], as well as to improve an individual's self-perception and self-control [15,25,39].

### 3.4.2. Methodological Competencies

In the analyzed interventions, it is shown that music promotes teamwork through practicing instrumental or choral ensembles [15,16,25,30,33,34,42,46,47] collaboration [30] and flexibility, as the ability to adapt to new situations [15].

Collaboration is another skill in where music has an important influence, facilitating the acquisition of social bonds [53], mainly through participation in educational settings [41,51], group music practice [56,62], and teacher training [46].

It is also demonstrated that cultural knowledge skills are used to perform musical activities [62].

### 3.4.3. Practical Skills

For the most part, we did not find numerous articles investigating the acquisition of practical skills through music; we can only mention the work of Howe [46], who states that music training generally allows for participants to develop discipline as a practical skill, which translates into an improvement in this skill.

## 4. Discussion and Conclusions

After conducting the analysis, it is concluded that music contributes to the improvement and development of soft skills, and some of them in a more significant way. Musical practice is particularly effective in the acquisition of leadership and teamwork [31,35,39,41]. Soler-Campo [63] confirms that music is one of the areas in which leadership development is essential for the effective exercise of musical work. Without it, the development of this activity would not be possible. In addition, it improves teamwork and the sense of togetherness that favors social cohesion [64].

Other skills that benefit the most from the development of musical practice are social skills that contribute, at an emotional level, to improvements in our well-being and self-perception [47,65–67].



Furthermore, it is concluded that music develops creativity by enhancing social interactions between subjects [46,55,56].

Most of the reviewed interventions are for adolescents and adults. Adolescents prioritize personal and social aspects, while adults improve skills such as creativity, leadership, teamwork, cooperation, responsibility, discipline, and communication; therefore, authors such as Howe [46] confirm that these two age groups are the most important to the acquisition of soft skills.

Half of the analyzed interventions focus their activity on collective practice, either instrumental or choral, while the other half of the interventions were carried out through musical practice in non-instrumental specialties. This confirms that the immediacy and universality of music allows for participants to use it without prior or specific knowledge, with music serving as a tool that can address the use of soft skills by any type of user.

In addition, it is observed that its scope of application is practically the same in formal and non-formal contexts, a fact that confirms its ease of adaptation to all environments, highlighting that, at the European level, its development occurs, in both contexts, due to the musical tradition that this continent possesses. In formal contexts, the skills of self-control and teamwork, commitment, flexibility [15], or leadership [24], fundamental competencies in teacher training, are significantly improved.

We can conclude that music improves soft skills by providing tools that allow for better life development and a greater possibility of adaptation to the labor market [36]. At present, the requirements of the current labor market force individuals to use skills related to achieving their goals, working collaboratively, and managing their own and others' emotions. Therefore, it is essential to include the acquisition of these skills in educational contexts. Given that musical activity is a tool that favors the learning of soft skills, it is necessary to include the work of these skills through music in academic environments that allow for individuals to improve them over time [68]. We note the growing interest in this topic, considering the number of articles published in scientific journals in recent years, and we conclude that the study of soft skills and their relation to music is a growing trend in the field of music education research. This systematic review confirms that this is a suitable and ideal element to improve the skills of a generalized population in any context.

#### *Study Limitations and Practical Implications*

The present study has several limitations that need to be commented on, perhaps the most important being the possibility of expanding the number of analyzed studies. In addition, the inclusion of the word "leadership" in the search equation, due to the non-identification of the term within the soft skills in the first search that was performed, may predetermine some of the results that were obtained, so it is important to note that this is considered a limitation within this study.

Regarding the practical implications of the study, once this review has been carried out, it would be of great interest to consider the development of training plans that incorporate music in both formal and non-formal educational contexts, knowing the different possibilities that music offers for the acquisition of fundamental competencies in 21st century society.

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