

EXPLORING THE IMPACT OF ORFF-BASED GROUP MUSIC LEARNING IN EARLY CHILDHOOD THROUGH THE CHIME MODEL

Neda Safarabed¹

¹MehreVelayat Private School, Iran

Corresponding Author: nedaabed089@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the impact of Orff-based group music education on preschool children's development in Iran, using the CHIME model (Child-Centered Holistic Instruction through Music and Ensemble). Rooted in the Orff-Schulwerk philosophy, the CHIME model incorporates four stages: imitation, exploration, improvisation, and composition. Adapted to the Iranian context, it utilizes local instruments, rhythms, and stories to support the intellectual, emotional, and social growth of children aged four to six. While music education for young children is gaining recognition in Iran, there is no formalized framework in the national early childhood education standards, with music often taught informally in private settings. This creates both a challenge and an opportunity; there is a lack of systematic group music education in public preschool settings, but also room to develop culturally appropriate models grounded in Iran's educational framework. Using a qualitative approach, the study employs constructivist grounded theory, classroom observations, and interviews with teachers and students from selected preschools in Iran. The CHIME framework emphasizes ensemble learning to enhance children's executive functioning, emotional regulation, empathy, and collaborative skills. It also aims to foster musical identity and appreciation for Iran's rich heritage. The research suggests that Orff-based group music education, adapted through the CHIME model, supports children's readiness, self-expression, and social integration. Additionally, it highlights imitation as a social learning process, advancing the potential of culturally responsive music education. The study has implications for curriculum development, teacher training, and early childhood education policy in Iran.

Keywords: Orff-Schulwerk, early childhood music education, Constructivist Grounded Theory, group music instruction, Iran, cultural adaptation.

1. INTRODUCTION

Early childhood education plays a pivotal role in shaping children's social and emotional intelligence, providing foundational experiences that support their capacity to regulate emotions, interact positively with peers, and adapt to diverse environments (Tabroni, Hardianty, & Sari, 2022). With regard to emerging research, music education fosters executive functioning skills in children, especially in inhibitory control, working memory, and cognitive flexibility, all of which are critical developmental milestones. For example, Rodriguez Gomez and Talero Gutiérrez (2022) conducted a review of 29 case-control and intervention studies, which highlighted the impact of music instruction on executive functions. The scientists noted music instruction has a powerful impact on core executive functions in younger audiences, remarkably on inhibition control, then on working memory and cognitive flexibility. Enhancements in these skills, influenced by music, resulted in changes in brain activity, proving the significant impact that early life experiences and music have on brain development. In a similar scope, longitudinal research shows that music instruction at the initial stages of education enhances educational and socio emotional activities and development (Ilari, 2020). As Selmani states (2024), children do not only use music as an appeal or casual pleasure, but also examine their self-identity, personal authority, and connections to other people through its lens. "Music education considerably fosters the mental health of learners through heightened self-efficacy and self-esteem important for academic participation and emotional coping" (Sun, 2022, p. 7). The Orff-Schulwerk method of music education is considered highly effective for children because, as they learn music, it incorporates movement, speech, and play- the very activities that they naturally do as they grow and develop. Through storytelling, rhythm, and group performance, this method motivates participation, thus fostering cognitive, social, and emotional development. Orff-based activities, as noted by Zhou (2024) and Meng (2023), not only make music education more engaging and fun but also stimulate imagination, creativity, and expressiveness important for primary and early education. Many of the basic approaches continue to influence the development of early childhood music education around the world. As Marinšek, Hmelak (2024) summarized, the Orff-Schulwerk method stresses creativity, learning in groups, and the use of speech, movement, and simple percussion instruments. The approach follows a cognitive developmental stage of imitation, exploration, improvisation, and composition which allows children to musically participate through play and social interaction. On the other hand, the Kodály approach focuses on the development of pitch, inner hearing, and musical literacy through the use of solfège, folk songs, and rhythm syllables during structured lessons. Its teaching design incorporates repeating a melody and rhythm with hand signs and successive degrees of mastery. Miha's study also covers Dalcroze Eurhythmics, which emphasizes rhythm and movement by having learners perform specific posture exercises that incorporate musical skill movements. Dalcroze regarded music education as "a spiritual-mental exercise, an art of movement which is not dance" (Marinšek, Hmelak 2024, p. 610). All of these have their strengths; nevertheless, the advantages of Orff's approach for group settings stem from its flexibility, cultural and play-based design. The difference between mere exposure to music and systematic teaching should be made clear.

Hands-on training with music is the only type that improves executive functions in children, especially in preschool and early school-aged children, as highlighted by Rodriguez Gomez and Talero Gutiérrez (2022). This is particularly true during early childhood, the stage when physical growth and play are vital, as stated by Xiong (2021). Unlike Gordon's Music Learning theory which emphasizes internal audiation and cognitive sequencing, Orff encourages learners to ensemble bend, Mold and choreograph music with their bodies and wide-ranging imagination (Mabini, 2024; Förster et al., 2023). Dalcroze Eurhythmics places a focus on movement within rhythm but lacks the orchestral and creative formulation opportunities Orff-Schulwerk offers in group settings (Mabini, 2024; Miha, 2024). Orff's unique character, as cited by Mabini (2024), is in the seamless integration of imitation, exploration, improvisation, and composition that together foster multi-faceted, developmentally sensitive cooperative learning, child autonomy, interaction, and peers using different approaches to richly, diversely, and deeply applicable music frameworks. The educational philosophy of Carl Orff is based on what he termed "elemental music," which integrates music, movement, and words into a single entity. For Orff, rhythm is not an abstract principle; in fact, it is life itself: "Rhythm is no abstract concept, it is life itself" (Orff, 1978, p. 17). He focused on percussion, free movement, and improvisation guided by the instinctive procedures of handclapping, stamping, and rattles. According to Orff, music education should emerge naturally from play and exploration of childhood rather than strict academic protocols which promote imagination and experiences instead of rote learning (Orff, 1978, pp. 17–22). The Orff-Schulwerk strategy, in its essence, encapsulates the tension between self-expression and group-oriented creativity in music education. In groups, instructors take on the role of guides, crafting balanced frameworks that invite student expression and personal input that is refined during group interactions. As Sangiorgio (2023) commented, "collaborative creative tasks were an integral part of music classroom life" through composing, improvising, and co-constructing within small groups (p. 65). This arrangement is effective in cultivating an environment in which "every individual is able to confidently add their ideas within the group," fostering creative dialogue and respect among fellow students (p. 66). Unlike most pedagogy frameworks that see personal expression and ensemble participation in conflicts, the Orff approach considers these aspects interdependent: learners sharpen their identities while making responsive 3 construction to the identities of others. Not only does this promote musical expression, but this pedagogy of collaborative creativity nurtures children's social emotional development, and inventive self-efficacy. In Iran, preschool education has received more attention lately because of its impact on the social, emotional, and cognitive development of children. Even though preschool education is not officially part of the national education system, preschool is acknowledged for its enduring contributions to learning, social adaptation, and wellbeing throughout life. Nonetheless, the Iranian preschool system is predominantly private and lacks a uniform structure, which results in inadequate government supervision, absence of a standardized curriculum, low teaching qualifications, and fragmented early childhood educational facilities (Solati Asl, Hoseini Khah, & Kian, 2022). Iranian preschool programs have, over the years, received global influence from various approaches like Montessori, Reggio Emilia, and

others. Such approaches focus on learning through exploration and creative expression and are child centered. Some Iranian scholars have shifted these models to create more comprehensive and skills-based curricula. Despite these attempts, many concerns remain, particularly about holistic and cohesive curriculum development and teacher preparation. One shortcoming of Iran's early education curricula is the lack of specialized music classes offered during preschool and elementary levels. Formal music education as a discipline is still absent in many public educational institutions. According to Ashrafizadeh (2021), music is a powerful resource for enhancing students' learning experience, yet it remains one of the underutilized subjects in high school curricula and most often exists only in a tokenistic or peripheral form, if at all, within the school programs. Even the singing of patriotic tunes is done with a certain degree of restraint, indicative of the attitudinal and organizational controls pertaining to the place of music within education. In addition to its limited existence in the curriculum, access to music education is further restricted due to a lack of trained specialists and absence of a uniform teaching policy. Seyrafi, Ghahremani, and Tahmasbzadeh Sheikhlari (2020) point out that music education in Iran, especially at the secondary level, fails to address critically important areas such as emotional development, creativity, and social interaction known to be integral parts of structured learning. To make progress, integrating music into the early childhood curriculum with sound policies and training programs for professionals would be a good first step. This effort would not only align with global educational standards but also contribute to students' holistic development by fostering cognitive, social, and emotional skills (Ashrafizadeh, 2021; Seyrafi et al., 2020). In addition, CHIME, which stands for "Child-Centered, Holistic Instruction through Music and Ensemble," has emerged as a culturally relevant approach aligned with the Orff Schulwerk approach. It retains the four foundational stages of the Orff process; imitation, exploration, improvisation, and composition (Chung, 2022), while these are tailored to fit the Iranian context of early childhood settings. Imitation, the first phase of the CHIME framework, is based on Orff-Schulwerk and implemented through teacher modeling by means of singing, movement, and rhythmic speech. These techniques reflect Orff's focus on auditory and physical participation (Chung, 2022), as well as fostering students' engagement in learning. Unlike traditional methods that encourage rote repetition, imitation within the CHIME framework is designed as an active form of participation that enhances discovery and involvement. The child-centered method blends skills and knowledge with developmentally appropriate activities, supporting learning through experience and interaction (Nicholas et al., 2021). This method fosters participation when imitation is utilized. Imitation incorporates the strategies of collaboration and creativity when used within student centered practices, as pointed out by Nielsen (2018). Moreover, Filippa et al. (2020) show that synchronized imitation of musical movements helps in the development of social emotional skills like shared attention, turn-taking, and emotional bonding, which all serve the purpose of fostering constructive cooperative environments for making music in CHIME. Imitation, then, is not paradoxical to teamwork; rather, in cooperative contexts fostered by a student-centered approach, it enhances collaboration and strengthens relationships among learners. In CHIME the exploration phase coincides with Orff's philosophy because children are allowed to flexibly express themselves and interact freely with sound

through their voices, bodies and/or instruments in a creative and happy way. As noted by Ahmad Shukri (2024), exploration in the Orff approach fosters imagination, rhythmic understanding, and self-expression, often in the form of movement, chanting, or playing instruments (pp. 128–130). This stage is facilitated by teachers allowing students to ‘work out their own musical ideas’ within a relaxed environment, fostering their sense of a musical identity and autonomy. This combines solo sound discovery with physical movement, group activity, and teamwork, resulting in cognitive, emotional, social, and holistic development. Exploration becomes the middle ground between musical play and purposeful learning, supporting the whole child approach in alignment with Orff’s intent pedagogically (pp. 137–139).

1.2 Problem Statement

Different relevant studies have shown the effectiveness of music education in early childhood, and particularly in group contexts, in promoting self-regulation, social skills, and emotional development (Ilari, 2020; Blasco Magraner et al., 2021; Linnavalli et al., 2021). When learning is focused on creativity, improvisation, and collaboration, the results are even stronger (Sangiorgio, 2023; Powell & Waiganayake, 2022). Social music education is highly relevant in the Iranian context. Unfortunately, music education in preschool settings is underdeveloped and largely available only as an extracurricular activity (Hasani & Parvin, 2024). The absence of trained music educators, lack of funding, and absence of a central curriculum in music education is cited as the possible causes. Although music is seen as an activity with a great value for youth development, this value is neglected at the policy level for reasons of politics, finances, and ideology (Hasani & Parvin, 2024). The current music education programs in Iran, like those of many other countries, give primacy consideration to the cognitive areas of learning while the socio-emotional, imaginative and symbolic aspects of learning that are critical for learning in the context of a group are almost always ignored (Seyrafi et al, 2020). The shortage of programs aimed at training teachers specialising in teaching music to the preschool age is, to a certain degree, the result of a lack of programs which focus on the child’s learning and development (Hasani & Parvin, 2024). Furthermore, most of the music education in Iran has, unfortunately, been treated as an individualized endeavour, to the detriment of the social and emotional gains to be made from learning music in a group (Hasani & Parvin, 2024; Seyrafi et al, 2020). The diverse and rich aspects of Iran’s musical heritage, which include a variety of traditional melodies and rhythms, have yet to be integrated in a systematic and organized way into the education of the very young in the country (Kalantari, 2023). A few teachers, for instance, have introduced music into the curriculum in a very informal way, but a comprehensive and contextually relevant methodology is still lacking (Kalantari, 2023). This paper presents the CHIME model (Child Centered Holistic Instruction through Music and Ensemble), which aims to address the curriculum and cultural gaps, along with gaps in pedagogy, by merging the Orff-Schulwerk approach in conjunction with the indigenous musical customs of Iran. Despite the theoretical promise of the CHIME model, it remains to be seen how it will perform in practice, especially in the context of Iran. This work aims to investigate the influence of group-based, culturally relevant music education on the social,

emotional and cognitive development of preschool children.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

As the cornerstone of any academic undertaking, the literature review must describe the key existing works related to the objective of the research and provide a critical overview relevant to it. In educational research, the literature review has many functions: it describes the state of research, highlights the gaps, aids methodological decisions, and explains the guiding framework of the study Kraus et al. (2022). Inquiries related to early childhood education, especially those addressing pedagogical innovation like the Orff-based group music learning are required to incorporate information from other disciplines like developmental psychology, music education, and curriculum studies. In consonance with this thesis regarding the influence of the CHIME model on early childhood development in Iran, the review aims at synthesizing evidence from international literature on music pedagogy with the socio-cultural context of the Iranian education system. Understanding the impact of ensemble-based music learning on the social, cognitive, and emotional development of children requires detailed attention to the research on development as well as teaching methodologies. Particularly, attention must be paid to how culturally responsive group strategies within the Orff-Schulwerk framework can be developed for implementation in less-researched diverse cultural contexts. In addition, the literature review should pay attention to the self-efficacy of teachers because it also impacts their preparedness, affecting the quality of early childhood music instruction teaching. As Hasani & Parvin, (2024) note, earlier experiences, institutional backing, and some degree of methodological innovation affect early childhood educators' assessment of their own competence. Their research indicates that educators who consider themselves able to provide child-initiated, hands-on activities are more likely to adopt developmentally suitable and integrative approaches. Therefore, the literature review, besides addressing the theoretical and empirical aspects of this study, highlights the professional conditions required for the CHIME model to be functional and effective in practice. The purpose of this chapter is to deeply analyze the relevant issues related to this research, starting with an analysis of holistic and child-centered learning theory, followed by an examination of general pedagogical frameworks of music teaching. It also investigates the developmental effects of learning music, the role of group music instruction, and various forms of Orff-Schulwerk used around the world. The chapter also includes the issues of Iran separately and examines the reasons for creating the CHIME framework. This review helps the study to identify the concepts and gaps that require additional investigation

2.1 The Role of Music Education in Early Childhood Development

The significance of music and its practical implementation in early childhood education have gained increasing attention over the past few decades ranging from its role in enhancing multiple domains of a child's development to the concordance of child-centered pedagogy (Powell and Waiganayake, 2022; Meng, 2023). However, formal early childhood music education, especially when conducted in a group setting, facilitates the development of social-emotional competencies, including cooperation,

empathy, and emotional self-regulation (Powell & Waiganayake, 2022). Music incorporated into the lesson not only improves cognitive functions but also aids in emotional expression and self-regulation (Ilari, 2020; Zhou, 2024). Furthermore, a child-centered approach facilitates active engagement in music making with peers and concentrating with a learning group, immersing the child in a dynamic social context (Xiong, 2021).

2.2 Orff-Schulwerk in Early Childhood Education

Orff-Schulwerk is a pedagogical approach developed by Carl Orff which combines music and movement, speech, and drama together as a unified, immersive learning experience. Orff's approach encourages participation in improvisation, exploration, and play with an emphasis on ensemble and creative music-making (Linnavalli, García Soni, & Tervaniemi, 2021). Research confirms Orff-Schulwerk's effectiveness in promoting creative expression and social interaction among young children, which makes it ideal for music education at the preschool level (Blasco-Magraner et al., 2021). In Iran, however, the use of Orff's approach is limited by cultural and institutional factors. Music education in the country is largely individualistic with an emphasis on formal style training.

2.3 Cultural Context and Adaptation

The Orff-Schulwerk Method has been used in many forms across the globe, receiving critique and specialty focus on each location. In the case of Iranian pupils, the formal teaching of Persian music and the Western approach to music education (Solati Asl & Hoseini Khah, 2022) provide the threads of a tapestry of multiple culture education system which need to be balanced. This study adopts the Orff-Schulwerk Method and integrate it to the Iranian culture and musical paradigm to formulate the CHIME framework (Child-Centered Holistic Instruction through Music and Ensemble).

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This research utilizes a qualitative approach which is a Constructivist Grounded Theory (CGT) study to understand the perceptions and practices of early childhood music educators in relation to Orff-based group teaching in Iran. According to Mohajan & Mohajan (2022), CGT, which is a contemporary advancement of the grounded theory approach, provides a broad, interpretative lens within which researchers may meaningfully engage with participants through reflexive and iterative analysis. Unlike classical grounded theory which posits that there is an objective reality awaiting discovery, knowledge and theory in CGT evolve from the researcher's experiences with participants and the socio-cultural contexts within which they live. Such a framework is particularly useful in areas of education which are under researched and

for which no theoretical framework exists to address the complexity of the lived realities (Mohajan & Mohajan, 2022). In the current research, CGT was used to develop an empirical conceptual model of group music instruction within the CHIME framework. This model applies child-centered, ensemble-based principles from the Orff-Schulwerk philosophy into the context of early childhood education in Iran. CGT is associated with symbolic interactionism and constructivist epistemology, focusing on meaning creation via communication, interaction, and cultural framework (Mohajan & Mohajan, 2022). Since the researcher draws from her professional background as a music educator, she is not removed from the situation but actively engaged in the participatory knowledge creation. Every aspect of reflexivity is integrated, meaning that the researcher's identity and cultural understanding work within, rather than against, the developing theory. Following the CGT methodology, data was gathered through semi-structured interviews and analyzed through open coding, focused coding, and theoretical categorization. The analytic process was grounded on 'constant comparison,' 'memo writing' and refinement of categories (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021). The objective was not to verify predefined theories, but rather to invite responses through participants' phrases and perspectives immersive enough to build grounded insights intertwined with educational practice and cultural narratives. This framework of inquiry meets the aims of generating original theoretical contributions related to Orff-inspired group music learning in the context of Iran. It emphasizes rigid methodological frameworks while advocating for educators perspectives, cultural appreciation, and collective pedagogical discourse (Mohajan & Mohajan, 2022).

3.2 Data Collection

In this study, Grounded Theory is approached with Constructivist Lens (CGT) focusing on participant meaning making and data collection reflexivity and iteration. Google Forms were used for the main method of semi-structured interviews that were conducted asynchronously. This method was chosen so that instructors would take part when it was most convenient for them, promoting deeper consideration with the teacher education level prompts (Hui & Wong, 2023). Each interview is made up of open questions meant to capture all details concerning teaching, experiences, challenges, and perceptions of Orff group music learning. The asynchronicity of the tools serves the co-constructivism focus of CGT, but most importantly will help those who work as teachers in different parts of the country with busy schedules (Adeyinka-Ojo, 2025). Even though it is written, participants are encouraged to provide in depth descriptions of lesson activities taught in real classrooms and use subsequent communication dubbed 'for clarification' freely. To address issues of understanding and culture, the guide was tested for accuracy on two early childhood educators who did not form part of the main study. Pilot feedback was incorporated into revised wording and logical progression of questions. As part of the CHIME framework, interview questions aim to examine the use and interpretation of teaching Orff-inspired ensembles in Iran's educational setting. In CGT methodology, the researcher remains self reflexively engaged throughout the entire process by actively participating in memo writing and analytical contemplation while data is being generated. New conceptual categories, if they emerge during early coding, can be followed up with

selected participants if the questions posed can be adjusted, as guided by Mohajan & Mohajan (2022). Approval for ethical conduct of the study was granted by Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) and after the data submission, digital informed consent was collected. Responses are confidential and stored securely. The method is digital, open-ended, and therefore participants can join from anywhere in the world irrespective of their region or the institution they are affiliated with, while still maintaining ethical and qualitative criteria in social research. To gather the texts needed for the study, various materials were translated with the help of artificial intelligence tools. These tools were used solely to assist in the translation stage. Each translation was re-checked and carefully revised to preserve the meaning of the original text before being added to the final thesis.

3.3 Data Analysis

These detailed findings from conversations with twenty music educators working in early childhood settings across Iran. Following a constructivist grounded theory framework, researchers organized insights into four themes echoing the CHIME model: Imitation, Exploration, Improvisation, and Composition. These categories emerged through cycles of open and focused coding and were fine-tuned by comparing comments from one participant to another. During the Imitation stage, teachers noted that children often begin by watching and copying, especially when they feel socially unsure or emotionally hesitant. Exploration has become a playful space where learners experiment with sounds, instruments, and movement, leading to personal discoveries and a boost in self-confidence. The Improvisation theme showed children's willingness to tinker with sound and rhythm on their own terms, while Composition illustrated how some move toward more organized creativity, often working together. Even though most observers praised the developmental benefits of group-based Orff learning, a handful of exceptions also appeared. Some children hesitated to mimic others, preferred one-on-one guidance, or found large, noisy classes overwhelming. Teachers pointed to outside pressures tight schedules, space limits, and parents' hopes that often slowed the full adoption of open-ended approaches. These opposing accounts added useful complexity and underscored the idea that musical progress always depends on its immediate context. Ongoing analytic and reflexive memos kept the researcher alert to personal biases and shifting interpretive lenses. Data were judged to have reached theoretical saturation, since no fresh codes or categories emerged in the final review stage. Taken together, the findings in this chapter provide an empirical platform for the next interpretive move. Chapter 5 will link observed patterns to wider theories and to the existing literature on early childhood music education.

4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

There is no data from which to draw conclusions, thus the discussion section will analyze the theoretical implications that stem from the inclusion of Orff-Schulwerk in

Iranian music instruction. What the research will illuminate is the way teachers confront and adjust to the challenges of contextualizing the Orff approach to the Iranian setting, as well as the resultant implications for children's development. Their investigation at the grade level, concerning the inclusion of cultural heritage in children's music instruction, will focus on the cultural aspect of the pedagogy of the CHIME framework, and the intersection of the Orff approach. The study attempts to enhance understanding about Orff-Schulwerk and its invention for music teaching at the preschool level in Iran. Employing CGT for research purposes will illuminate the professional and teaching hurdles the educators face in executing group music instruction. The research also emphasizes the need for cultural adaptation to the practical use of educational systems and offers theoretical groundwork for the form practices to culturally responsive teaching methods.

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