Singing, Moving, and Learning: A Reflective Teacher Study Group for Creative Early Childhood Educators in China

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Abstract

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This qualitative case study investigates how early childhood educators in China integrate music and movement into everyday teaching through a collaborative Teacher Study Group (TSG). To address the gap between preservice musical training and classroom practice, this study asks: (1) How do early childhood educators transition from using music and movement primarily for engagement to embedding these creative elements as structured, pedagogically driven strategies? (2) In what ways can music function as a multidimensional pedagogical tool to foster young children's holistic development? (3) How do educators leverage a collaborative TSG, grounded in reflective practice and action research, to refine and continually innovate their instructional methods?

Over 12 weeks, three early childhood English teachers in China engaged in an adapted TSG model that combined shared readings (drawing on Education Through Music and SongWorks), collaborative lesson design, classroom trials, and iterative reflection. Data included session recordings, teaching artifacts, lesson plans, and reflective notes. Three interlocking findings emerged. First, teachers' integration of music and movement unfolded nonlinearly: they progressed from early hesitations through iterative cycles of trial and reflection, culminating in coherent, pedagogically aligned routines. Second, student engagement served as the most sensitive barometer of pedagogy; teachers progressively used multimodal, observable evidence (e.g., participation and autonomy) to adjust instruction in real time. Third, functioning as a

dynamic scaffold, the TSG leveraged collegial feedback and action research cycles to help teachers transition from an objective-delivery mindset to creative, inquiry-driven practice. Implications include designing professional development that honors nonlinear growth; positioning multimodal indicators of student engagement as formative evidence when integrating music- and movement-based strategies; and leveraging culturally resonant Teacher Study Group (TSG) structures to bridge theory and practice. This study offers a context-grounded example, together with practical design principles, to support the adoption of music-infused, creative pedagogy in early childhood settings in China.

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Dedication

To All Who Raised Me Up

To my wife, who made room for this dream by carrying what I couldn't—at home and in my heart.

To my parents, thank you for every sacrifice, every prayer, and every quiet act of faith.

To my teachers, who taught me to listen closely, question thoughtfully, and care deeply.

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Chapter 1: Beginning with Music and Purpose

Introduction

We know that music is of great significance to children. In early childhood, music plays a vivid and vital role in their development and lays the groundwork for lifelong learning, well-being, and happiness. Music and the arts can help children process emotions, improve memory and language skills, foster collaboration, and enhance motor skills. Above all, it nurtures the imagination. And of course, children enjoy music and find great joy in its play!

This dissertation examines three early childhood educators seeking to integrate more music into their classrooms. In Chinese preschools governed by tightly prescribed curricula, music's potential often goes untapped as teachers rely on familiar routines rather than experimenting with song and movement. Faced with the dual pressures of curriculum mandates and classroom management, Chinese educators frequently struggle to find concrete methods for weaving music into each lesson. To address this gap, I designed a twelve-week Teacher Study Group where participants explored research- and practice-based strategies, implemented musical pedagogies in their classrooms, and engaged in collaborative reflection to develop practical, sustainable approaches for embedding music and movement into daily teaching.

When early childhood educators in China graduate from university or college preparation programs, they have studied various music courses, such as music theory, vocal methods, piano playing, dance techniques, nursery rhymes, and general music teaching pedagogy. However, when they enter a preschool or kindergarten classroom, I have observed that they have difficulty applying their musical knowledge to pedagogical practice. Research shows that Chinese preschool teachers report low confidence and gaps in musical skills, and they feel under-prepared to deliver developmentally appropriate music experiences for young children (Cheng, Yahya &

Ladin, 2024). It appears, then, that their learning has not transferred or enabled them to incorporate music and movement confidently into their classrooms. This dissertation was an attempt to provide pedagogical support to three English language teachers using a teacher study group to understand better and improve this disconnection. The goal was to help them acquire research-based principles and ideas and explore changes in their teaching practices through music.

Personal Narrative

Growing up in China, I spent a lot of time participating in two extracurricular activities: sports and music. Throughout childhood, I enjoyed playing many types of sports, and while I loved to sing, I admit to the daily struggles of practicing the violin! Still, I never gave up. After my family immigrated to Canada, I embraced the opportunity to sing in multiple choirs and play in several quartets and orchestras. Never did I know that music would play such a prominent role in life down the road! During this same time, I had dreams of achieving greatness in my burgeoning business career. Though I never "quit" music, I studied commerce at my undergraduate university.

The summer I completed my business degree, I discovered my passion for education on my first volunteer teaching trip to China. In a rural school near Beijing, I taught English and music to children of migrant workers. As much as I saw happiness on their faces when we "foreign" teachers led their classes, I saw an equal amount of stress and uneasiness when their "regular" teachers attempted to drill knowledge into their heads. This experience made me reflect on various issues in the Chinese education system.

One prominent issue at the time, and still evident today, was the prevalence of a one-size-fits-all approach to education in which students were expected to conform to a rigid curriculum

devoid of individualization or differentiation (Zhao, Li, & Liu, 2023). This cookie-cutter approach failed to recognize students' diverse learning styles, interests, and abilities, resulting in a disconnection between the curriculum and students' lived experiences. Consequently, many students struggled to engage with the material, leading to disinterest, frustration, and ultimately disengagement from the learning process. Furthermore, the hyper-focus on "mere" academic achievement came at the expense of what I now consider a more holistic process, one that neglected students' socio-emotional needs. The relentless pressure to excel academically left little room for cultivating essential life skills such as resilience, adaptability, and emotional intelligence, to say nothing of creativity, or the arts. As a result, Chinese students may graduate from an education system that is academically proficient but ill-equipped to help learners navigate the complexities of the real world.

Another critical issue was the limited emphasis on interactive and inquiry-based learning methods. Traditional teaching practices prioritized passive learning, in which students receive information from the teacher without actively engaging with the material or participating in meaningful discussions (Michel, Cater & Varela, 2009). This approach can stifle curiosity and inhibit the development of critical thinking skills, an essential disposition for solving authentic life problems and fostering innovation.

Moreover, the hierarchical nature of the Chinese classroom, sometimes associated with traditional Confucian values—marked by teacher-centered instruction and strict adherence to authority—tends to stifle student creativity and limit opportunities for autonomy, as it often encourages rote learning over critical inquiry and independent thought. I make this assertion based on both personal history and observation. Too often, students are discouraged from questioning authority or challenging the status quo, perpetuating a culture of conformity and

stifling intellectual exploration. This lack of cognitive freedom hampers the development of independent thinking, which I believe is not only essential for driving societal progress and for addressing complex challenges, but a fundamental aspect of what it means to be human. Additionally, over-emphasizing standardized testing creates a narrow definition of success and perpetuates a culture of academic elitism (Fu, 2017). To be sure, I have also seen this narrowness in North America! Students in both contexts are often measured solely by their ability to perform well on exams, relegating other forms of intelligence and talents to the periphery (Kelleghan, Madaus & Airasian, 2012). I believe this narrow focus on academic achievement undermines the intrinsic value of learning and contributes to the commodification of education, where success is equated to high test scores rather than holistic personal development (Dewey, 1938; Greene, 1995; Ravitch, 2010; Vygotsky, 1978; Bruner, 1996).

As a Chinese Canadian who has lived extensively in the U.S., I am acutely attuned to the cultural and educational disparities between the Eastern and Western pedagogical approaches. While acknowledging the academic rigor and discipline inherent in traditional Chinese education, I discern a conspicuous absence of emphasis on holistic development and individualized learning. This dissonance evokes a sense of duty within me; I want these educational shortcomings, particularly in ensuring equitable access to comprehensive schooling experiences for Chinese children, irrespective of their socioeconomic backgrounds, indeed for all children everywhere. My impetus to contribute to ameliorating Chinese education specifically derives from a deep personal conviction and commitment to bridging the schism between Eastern and Western educational paradigms. A fusion, if possible, would aim to synergize the academic excellence entrenched in the Chinese educational ethos with a somewhat more holistic and student-centric ethos characteristic of Western so-called “progressive” pedagogical

methodologies (Yang & Li, 2018). Through this amalgamation, I aspire to cultivate an educational milieu that harmonizes scholastic achievement with the cultivation of well-rounded, socially adept individuals primed for success in an ever-evolving global landscape. Such an approach harmonizes with my work in cultural diplomacy.

Central to my educational philosophy is the venerable Chinese adage "三岁看大，七岁看老" (sān suì kàn dà, qī suì kàn lǎo), meaning a person's character and behaviors developed in the early years will determine what he or she will become in adulthood. It encapsulates the profound influence of early childhood experiences on the trajectory of human development. To me, it foregrounds what is at stake in this dissertation. This maxim underscores the pivotal role of formative years in shaping an individual's cognitive, socio-emotional, and behavioral proclivities. Our lives are not fixed, but early childhood is important. Consequently, this maxim underscores the exigency of early childhood education initiatives that provide a nurturing and cognitively enriching environment conducive to holistic development, thereby laying a robust foundation for future academic and personal growth and enrichment.

While this proverb rang true to my beliefs, at the time, as an amateur in the field of education, I had not fully discovered the significance of early childhood education, nor made explicit connections to my interests in music and sports. Nevertheless, on a personal level, I believe that unless we bring variety to children, they risk stagnation in development. Soon, I decided to turn all my attention to this critical period, realizing how early childhood is essential to children's development. However, on this journey, I decided to adopt a non-traditional approach, not pursuing an early childhood degree (which would be deemed logical). Instead, I turned to the twin fields closest to my heart: athletics and music.

Reflections from Teachers College

Arriving at Teachers College, I spent my first year studying and researching physical education under the guidance of Professor Laura Azzarito, who introduced me to constructivism and an array of fascinating education philosophies, and I took a couple of music education courses as electives. Soon after the first few days of class, I began grappling with two questions. One, raised by Professor Randall Allsup, was, "What is worth teaching in the classroom?" The second was "How do students learn best?" How can teachers engage student learning in ways that involve the interests and creativity of both the students and teachers? Upon completing my first degree, I was fortunate to be accepted into the Music Education Master of Education program, where I continued my exploration of early childhood music and movement.

Teaching at Teachers College's Hollingworth Preschool, which regards music, especially singing, as an essential form of communication, allowed me to observe the significance of incorporating music (and movement) in a classroom. The school's website says that "song is the thread that weaves our community together and frames our days in joy" (Hollingworth, n.d.). Through a pilot study, I observed and noted how children joyfully interacted with music and saw teachers who regarded themselves as not proficient in music or singing, but still using their so-called "limited skill set" to enrich the environment. As a result of the inclusion of music (and movement), the classroom experience was enhanced, aligning with research showing that students paid greater attention (Sridharan et al., 2007), became more engaged, and improved their memory retention (Chan et al., 1998; Ho et al., 2003; Schendel & Palmer, 2007).

From that point, I began contemplating how educators can creatively harness the power of music, singing, and movement to enrich not only children's learning and classroom experience but also their overall growth and well-being. My questioning and investigation led me back to a course I had taken earlier: Creativity and Problem Solving in Music Education, with

Professor Allsup. It was an eye-opening encounter during which the class examined and delved into various approaches and ideas for integrating creativity into teaching practices. Moreover, Randall's teaching philosophy inspired my thinking and resonated deeply with my aspirations. New ideas converged with my commitment to providing children with holistic learning experiences through teachers who strive to enhance their skills in providing children with a creative classroom environment.

Randall's philosophy is rooted in commitment to creative and reflective teaching practices that prioritize teaching the whole child (Allsup & Westerlund, 2012). This holistic approach not only addresses academic needs but also nurtures emotional, social, and physical development. In his framework, empowering creativity is fundamental; teachers are encouraged to foster dynamic, inquiry-based environments where both teachers and their students are active participants in the learning process. In the chapter titled "Toward Open Encounters," from *Remixing the Classroom*, Randall (2016) clearly outlines a holistic, reflective teaching philosophy. For instance, he emphasizes that teachers should foster dynamic, inquiry-based environments in which teachers, along with their students, take an active role in the learning process. In addition, reflective thinking is equally critical, as it urges educators to engage in ongoing self-assessment and remain open to new methods and ideas. Furthermore, by embracing discomfort and uncertainty, teachers are better prepared to navigate the challenges of modern education, continuously adapting their practices to meet the diverse needs of their students. This integrated approach offers a pathway to transform classrooms into spaces of inclusive and transformative learning.

Building on my reflections at Teachers College and the transformative power of music in early childhood education, I have come to appreciate that the potential of creative teaching

extends far beyond the classroom. During this period, my exposure to the Music Education Program—and particularly with Randall's teachings—transformed my approach to classroom instruction. My early experiences and subsequent observations of how music enriches learning have laid a strong foundation for understanding creativity as not only an educational tool but also as a means of building bridges between diverse cultural contexts.

Cultural Diplomacy and the Power of Music

As I contemplate my research today, I am even more invested in investigating creative teaching in education, particularly as I expand my work into the realm of cultural diplomacy. In my recent professional experiences working with the International Academy for Arts and Cultural Studies, a designated focal point in the mission of promoting cultural diplomacy initiatives for the United Nations, I have deepened my engagement with the arts as a cultural diplomatic practice, working in a dynamic field that seeks to promote understanding and collaboration across national and cultural boundaries through the exchange of cultural expressions, ideas, and information (Kim, 2017). Cultural diplomacy, broadly defined as "the exchange of ideas, information, art, language, and other aspects of culture among nations and peoples in order to foster mutual understanding" (Cummings, 2003, p. 1), plays a pivotal role in fostering international dialogue and cooperation by creating channels for conversation and collaboration that transcend traditional diplomacy (Schneider, 2006).

The power of music in cultural diplomacy lies not only in its emotional impact but also in its ability to embody cultural values, histories, and identities. When a nation presents its music on the international stage, it communicates much more than sound; it projects its cultural identity, aspirations, and values (Zlotnyk et al., 2024). Through this medium, music serves as a form of so-called "soft power," influencing foreign audiences by promoting goodwill,

understanding, and mutuality (Nye, 2004). In this way, music and the arts serve as ambassadors, creating a non-verbal dialogue that invites mutual appreciation and respect. Sharing music through international performances, collaborations, or educational exchanges can foster long-term relationships between countries, as it speaks directly to the cultural narratives that shape each society. As Cummings (2003) points out, these exchanges are not just symbolic but can lead to tangible diplomatic outcomes, reinforcing cultural diplomacy's significance on the global stage.

Positionality & Beliefs: A Bridge to Global Understanding

For both cultural diplomacy and education, the potential to foster global understanding rests on a shared foundation: the significance and power of creativity. Creativity is at the heart of arts and cultural diplomacy, providing the innovation necessary to maintain relevance and impact. Creativity allows cultures to adapt and reinterpret their traditions in ways that resonate with contemporary global audiences, ensuring that the arts remain a dynamic force in diplomacy (Craft, 2005). Contemporary analyses emphasize that cultural diplomacy must use creative, two-way, adaptable formats to reach and inspire audiences; when strategy and support are lacking, its potential remains unrealized (Schneider, 2009). Creativity helps bridge these divides by fostering new cultural expression and dialogue forms. As such, creativity is not just an individual skill but a critical cultural tool that enables nations to communicate in innovative and meaningful ways. Through their inherent creativity, the arts challenge perceptions and invite audiences to consider new perspectives, thus enhancing the potential for mutual understanding.

In educational contexts, fostering creativity is equally crucial, as it prepares individuals to participate in these broader exchanges. Vygotsky (2004) highlights the role of creativity in early childhood as a means of developing higher-order cognitive functions, such as problem-solving

and critical thinking; he explains that the brain does not merely "store and retrieve our previous experience" but actively "combines and creatively reworks elements of this past experience and uses them to generate new propositions and new behavior" (Vygotsky, 2004, p. 8). These skills are essential to navigating the complex social and cultural landscapes that define today's global diplomacy. By cultivating creativity in students, educators equip them with the ability to think flexibly and adapt to new situations—qualities that are indispensable in cultural diplomacy. This connection between creativity and cultural diplomacy underscores the importance of integrating arts education into curricula, as it directly contributes to building future generations of global citizens capable of fostering international understanding.

Music in education, in particular, offers unique opportunities to cultivate creativity while simultaneously fostering intercultural understanding. As Hallam (2010) notes, engaging with music from a young age promotes cognitive and emotional development, encouraging abstract thinking and creative problem-solving. Additionally, music provides a platform for collaboration and collective creativity, essential components of cultural diplomacy. Ilari, Chen-Hafteck and Crawford (2013) emphasize that through shared singing and socioculturally framed activities, children develop social skills, positive attitudes toward others, and group unity—foundations for teamwork and open-mindedness in cross-cultural interactions. In this sense, music education does not merely teach technical skills; it can also nurture the social and emotional capacities necessary for preparing individuals for diplomacy and collaboration on a global scale.

However, despite its importance, creativity in education—and, by extension, in cultural diplomacy—faces significant challenges, especially in rigid, standardized educational systems. Ewing (2010) points out that the emphasis on standardized testing and prescribed curricula often stifles creativity in the classroom, limiting teachers' ability to implement innovative pedagogies.

This issue is particularly relevant in contexts like China, where the education system tends to prioritize academic achievement over creative exploration. Nonetheless, research shows that when teachers integrate creative approaches, such as using music in foreign language instruction, they can significantly enhance student engagement and learning outcomes (Bokiev et al., 2018). For instance, using music to teach a foreign language makes the learning process more enjoyable and exposes students to the cultural nuances of the language, thereby fostering a deeper understanding of the culture. In doing so, teachers are encouraging creativity and helping students develop the skills needed to engage in cultural exchanges and understand diverse perspectives.

Creative teachers and cultivating teachers' creativity in teaching are pivotal in enhancing students' creativity. Research in educational psychology shows that the classroom climates and pedagogical moves teachers design can shape students' creative engagement and outcomes (Beghetto & Kaufman, 2010). Creative teachers foster learning environments where exploration, curiosity, and innovation are encouraged, allowing students to engage in problem-solving and critical thinking. According to Beghetto and Kaufman (2010), creative teaching goes beyond simply delivering content; it involves creating opportunities for students to take intellectual risks, think divergently, and make connections between seemingly unrelated ideas. This process is essential for developing students' creative potential, as it encourages them to move beyond rote memorization and engage with material in deeper, more meaningful ways.

Moreover, teachers who model creativity in their pedagogical approaches demonstrate to students that creativity is valued and a necessary part of the learning process (Craft, 2005). When teachers employ creative methods, such as using music, they showcase the adaptability and flexibility required to approach challenges from multiple perspectives. This modeling is crucial

because students often learn by observing their teachers' behaviors and attitudes. If teachers demonstrate openness to experimentation and failure, students are more likely to feel comfortable doing the same, a crucial component of creative development (Beghetto & Kaufman, 2010).

In summary, creativity serves as the cornerstone linking the arts, education, and cultural diplomacy. It ensures that cultural exchanges remain relevant and engaging, enabling nations and their people to communicate through shared artistic and cultural experiences. In my new role, I am actively working at this intersection, using the arts as a vehicle for cultural diplomacy. Therefore, it is significant to research how teachers use music creatively to enhance their teaching in the classroom, as this work contributes at the grassroots level to fostering creativity. By affording teachers opportunities to integrate music into their pedagogical practices, we can cultivate an environment where students not only learn academic content but also develop the creative thinking and life skills necessary for navigating an increasingly interconnected world. Creative teaching through music nurtures students' ability to engage with diverse perspectives; through the use of music, it is not just about enhancing education—it is about laying the groundwork for more profound intercultural understanding and collaboration, contributing to the broader goals of cultural diplomacy.

Innovative Paradigms in Music Education: From ETM to SongWorks

As I delved into integrating music into early childhood classrooms, I discovered the pioneering work of Mary Helen Richards (1921-1998) and the transformative initiative of the SongWorks catalogue. Richards' work with Education Through Music (ETM), inspired by Kodály, champions the concept of educating the whole child by nurturing cognitive, emotional, social, and physical development simultaneously, thereby supporting an educational model that

addresses multiple facets of learners' identities. Richard's approach emphasizes creating a nurturing environment where every student feels valued, respected, and safe to take risks, which is essential for cultivating both academic and personal growth. Central to her philosophy is promoting collaboration and communication, as ETM encourages students to share ideas, work together, and build strong interpersonal connections through interactive musical activities. Richards also advocates for teaching creatively, inspiring educators to design innovative and engaging lessons that spark curiosity and imaginative expression. She continuously refined her methods through reflective practice, viewing self-assessment and feedback as critical tools to evolve pedagogical strategies that could meet the unique dynamics of each classroom. Integral to her process is valuing mistakes as learning opportunities, reframing errors as essential steppingstones toward deeper understanding and growth. Most importantly, ETM utilizes play-based learning to ensure that activities remain dynamic, enjoyable, and effective in fostering a lifelong passion for music and learning.

SongWorks, as an extension of Richards' legacy, operationalizes these ETM principles to create a framework that resonates with diverse educational settings. Drawing on a rich tradition of folk songs and singing games, SongWorks embodies the philosophy of "Playful Teaching, Vibrant Learning" (Bennett & Bartholomew, 1997), transforming the classroom into a space where creative expression and active engagement are at the forefront. It codifies a set of guiding principles—such as students deserving an engaging learning environment, and learning is holistic and constructive—an ethos that empowers educators to adapt and thrive in varied settings. Notably, SongWorks has redefined traditional music pedagogy by emphasizing student-centered learning experiences that simultaneously build music skills and foster collaboration among peers. Its practical applications have transcended borders, with adaptations in countries

like Japan, where SongWorks-inspired approaches are used to teach English through engaging, song-based methods. By championing experimentation and viewing mistakes as valuable learning opportunities, SongWorks creates an environment where both teachers and students can explore and innovate without fear of failure. Ultimately, this initiative aspires to deepen musical literacy, and also to cultivate lifelong learning, creative problem-solving, and intercultural dialogue, resonating with the evolving needs of contemporary educational landscapes.

Although frameworks such as ETM and SongWorks offer glimpses of hope for nurturing creativity, many early childhood educators still struggle to put these models into practice, despite completing formal music training during their college preparation. Teachers often encounter practical obstacles when trying to integrate structured musical activities into their daily routines (Crooke & McFerran, 2015). This gap between what theory promises and what happens in the classroom persists across the broader educational landscape, leaving music's full potential underutilized even though its developmental benefits are well-documented. Against this backdrop, I hope to underscore the urgent need to bridge the divide between theoretical frameworks and hands-on implementation in music education, especially within Chinese early childhood settings.

Problem Statement

A reduction of music in education is occurring around the globe, and China is no different (Aróstegui, 2016). However, as offered earlier, music can support and strengthen learning and development, and is fundamental to what it means to be human (Hargreaves, 1986; Blacking, 1973). While more experts advocate for the significance of music, those teachers responsible for introducing and involving music in the classroom fear their unpreparedness or inability to adjust or translate clinical experiences to "real" classrooms. Based on my

understanding of the Chinese system and interactions with Chinese early childhood teachers, they study music in their postsecondary education, probably much more than most pre-service teachers in North America. It is likely that they possess a good deal of musical knowledge that should be beneficial in creating meaningful environments and experiences that encourage participation in music for preschool children. Indeed, I believe many Chinese early childhood teachers have *more* extensive and diverse toolkits than most other teachers worldwide!

Ironically, however, many Chinese teachers have not provided or scaffolded children's musical experiences for various reasons. When children spend as much time as they do in classrooms, their developmental and learning potential can be stymied without their teachers' purposeful planning and intentional teaching. As opposed to a win-win situation, what is worth teaching is neglected, and the power of music will be buried under other subjects. It would be a vast disappointment if the problem could not be ameliorated so that the untapped promise within teachers' pedagogy and children's learning could not be fulfilled. From my personal experience, a willing Chinese educator has much to offer when provided with the necessary support. This support may come in various forms, such as specialized training programs, access to resources and materials, mentorship from experienced music educators, and opportunities for collaboration with other educators. However, without adequate support, even the most enthusiastic teachers may struggle to effectively incorporate music and movement into their curriculum, missing out on the myriad benefits it can bring to students' holistic development.

Plan of Research

As I determined what I intended to share with Chinese educators, I turned my attention to identifying potential participants for my dissertation. Initially, I planned to recruit teachers working in preschools. However, a strategic revision led me to recognize that English language

teachers—particularly those experienced in using English songs in their instruction—would be a more suitable cohort. This adjustment was based on the understanding that educators already familiar with integrating music and movement in their teaching practices would more readily assimilate the proposed pedagogical concepts. During a pilot study, which will be discussed in Chapter Three, I engaged with a group of educators at an English learning center in China and conducted a professional development session. From the study, I learned that the practical challenges of translating theoretical, pedagogical strategies into everyday classroom practices are more complex than initially anticipated. Specifically, my pilot study revealed that even well-trained educators need additional, targeted support to adapt these methods effectively within their unique contexts, which is difficult in a large group setting, albeit the teachers had fun working with one another which likely resulted from the playfulness and joy of music and movement. I believed that a small, collaborative group setting fostering deeper reflective practice and more effective sharing of insights would be more suited for my dissertation.

Therefore, the methodology I ended up choosing involved selecting a cohort of three early childhood educators affiliated with an English learning center in China. Over a period of 12 weeks, these educators participated in a structured teacher study group, exploring pedagogical strategies and their practical applications within the classroom context. To facilitate comprehensive engagement, I prepared instructional content in the form of weekly sharing documents presented in both Chinese and English while also serving as a participant observer throughout the study. Participating educators collaboratively and individually designed and implemented various lesson plans, following discussions and examinations of the underlying pedagogical principles. They reflected on their teaching experiences during subsequent sessions of the teacher study group. This iterative process was designed to enhance both the theoretical

understanding and practical implementation of pedagogical innovations within the targeted educational context.

Teacher Study Groups

As I explored research methodologies and models akin to Chinese lesson preparation groups—which I still vividly recall watching my mother, an English teacher, actively participating in back in her teaching days—I discovered that Teacher Study Groups (TSGs) offer a potentially culturally relevant and effective approach to professional development. When done well, TSGs foster continuous, self-directed learning by emphasizing voluntary commitment and active engagement, underpinned by the belief that teachers must take ownership of their professional growth rather than participate merely out of obligation. By providing a forum for educators to share both successes and setbacks, TSGs can cultivate a sense of community that supports emotional well-being and intellectual challenge. This collaborative environment encourages the exchange of diverse perspectives, critical reflection on teaching practices, and the integration of research-based strategies into everyday instruction. Drawing on educational theories such as Vygotsky's social learning, which suggests learning is situated in interactions with those around (Vygotsky, 1962), TSGs serve not only as venues for lesson planning but also as hubs for ongoing pedagogical exploration and collaborative problem-solving.

The TSG model used in this study was informed by the work of Gersten et al. (2010), which offered a comprehensive conceptual framework for integrating theoretical knowledge with practical application. According to this framework, professional development may be optimized when research-based pedagogical strategies are infused into daily instructional routines without overhauling existing curricula. The model advocated sustained active learning through iterative, extended sessions that provide educators with opportunities for exploration and collaborative

problem-solving. This approach hopes to deepen subject matter understanding and facilitate long-term retention but also helps the translation of theoretical insights into practical improvements in the classroom. By actively engaging in their own learning process, educators are potentially empowered with the tools and confidence to implement innovative practices that positively impact student outcomes.

Central to Gersten et al.'s framework was the nurturing of collegial support networks, which are vital for effective professional development. TSGs enable educators to build collaborative relationships, exchange ideas, share best practices, and develop common understandings grounded in educational research. These structured interactions foster a sense of community and mutual support, which is essential for sustaining continuous professional growth. The framework also stresses the importance of aligning TSG activities with existing curricular standards and educational priorities, ensuring that professional development remains both theoretically sound and practically relevant. Furthermore, TSGs promote a culture of reflective practice by encouraging teachers to critically assess their instructional methods, evaluate student outcomes, and identify areas for continuous improvement. Regular, structured reflection and feedback not only cultivate a growth mindset but also help to empower educators to become lifelong learners dedicated to enhancing their expertise and effectiveness.

Research Questions

1. How do early childhood educators transition from using music and movement primarily for engagement to embedding these creative elements as structured, pedagogically driven strategies?

This question explored the educators' shift from a casual or "fun-only" approach to music and movement toward a more deliberate, instructional method that systematically integrates

these elements into daily classroom practice. Although teachers may intuitively recognize that music and movement boost children's enthusiasm and attention, they often struggle to connect these creative experiences to broader educational goals, skill development, and assessment. By examining how and why educators move beyond ad hoc usage, this inquiry tried to highlight the process of learning and adopting research- and practice-based pedagogical ideas, as well as the attempts to incorporate them into lessons. Ultimately, the question sought to illuminate the pathways through which early childhood educators can become more intentional and confident, employing music and movement not merely for engagement but as essential tools that deepen learning across all areas of the curriculum.

2. In what ways can music function as a multidimensional pedagogical tool to foster young children's holistic development?

As discussed earlier and more in-depth in the next chapter, music, by its very nature, resonates across cognitive, emotional, social, and physical domains, making it a powerful vehicle for comprehensive growth in early childhood settings. This question looked to investigate the multifaceted roles that music can play beyond the immediate pleasure it provides. For instance, music may support language development, nurture creativity and imagination through improvisation and structured play, and facilitate social bonding as children collaborate on singing games or group performances. It also fosters physical well-being by encouraging movement. By delving into these interconnected aspects, the research question aimed to reveal how pedagogically informed music instruction can create a synergistic environment in which children's holistic development thrives.

3. How do educators leverage a collaborative teacher study group, grounded in reflective practice and action research, to refine and innovate their instructional methods continually?

Recognizing that professional growth flourishes in supportive, idea-sharing communities, this question focused on the potential of a teacher study group (TSG) to catalyze ongoing instructional innovation. TSGs offer a structured yet flexible space for educators to engage in collective inquiry, conduct action research, and reflect on their practices in conversation with peers. By examining classroom experiences and analyzing the effectiveness of varied teaching strategies, particularly those involving music and movement, educators can look to refine their approaches using real-time feedback and shared insights. This cycle of reflection, experimentation, and mutual support encourages a culture of continuous learning, asking that teachers remain adaptive and responsive to students' evolving needs while also advancing their own professional expertise.

Research Methodology Overview

This study employed a qualitative research methodology to explore the creative integration of music and movement in early childhood teaching practices. The research was framed as a case study focusing on a particular Teacher Study Group (TSG) composed of three experienced educators from an after-school English learning center in Deyang, China, with me serving as the facilitator. This qualitative approach enabled an investigation of the participants' subjective experiences and the ways in which they implemented various pedagogical strategies. The study was structured around the TSG model, which functioned both as a collaborative professional development platform and as a site for teacher action research. Within the TSG, a five-phase recursive process was initially designed to guide the research: (1) Debrief and

Reflection, (2) Introducing New Ideas, (3) Discussing New Ideas, (4) Collaborative Lesson Planning, and (5) Assignment. This model was designed to promote reflective practice, collective inquiry, and the continuous refinement of teaching methods based on empirical evidence. As the TSG progressed, modifications were made to the model to better reflect the evolving needs and dynamics of our group, such as combining the phases to allow for more fluid reflections and discussions.

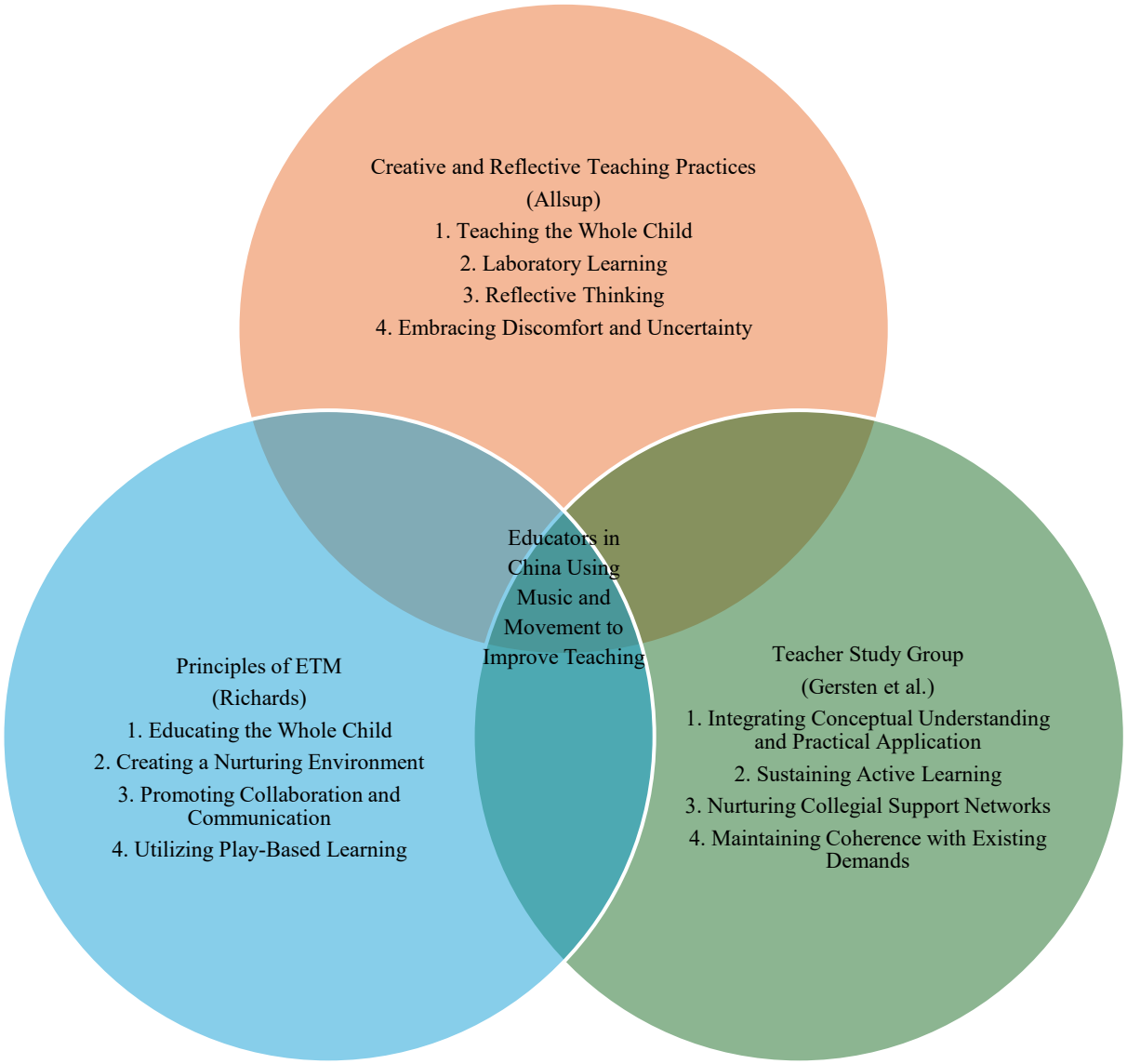
Data collection methods included observations, interviews, audio and video recordings of group sessions and classroom practices, and the analysis of artifacts such as lesson plans and reflective journals. Thematic analysis was employed to identify patterns and themes within the data, providing insight into the process of integrating music and movement on both student engagement and teacher professional growth. This methodology not only supported an understanding of how creative teaching practices evolve in real-world contexts but also underscored the importance of teacher collaboration and reflective inquiry in driving educational innovation. Ultimately, the chosen research design facilitated an exploration of the interplay between theory and practice, offering insights into the potential of integrating music and movement into early childhood classrooms.

Conceptual Framework

My conceptual framework was informed by three interrelated lenses: My mentor Randall Allsup's Creative and Reflective Teaching Practices, as experienced in class, Mary Helen Richards' Principles of Education Through Music, and Gersten et al.'s Teacher Study Group Conceptual Framework. The first lens emphasized a holistic approach to teaching that nurtures the whole child by fostering creativity and reflective inquiry and came out of my direct participation in Randall's classes at Teachers College. The second lens, derived from Education

Through Music, advocated for integrating music into the curriculum to support cognitive, emotional, social, and physical development while creating a nurturing, collaborative classroom environment. The third lens leveraged the Teacher Study Group model to bridge theoretical insights with practical application, promoting active, iterative professional development. This model offered encouragement to engage in continuous reflection and refining instructional methods based on research-based strategies. Together, these lenses offered a perspective that not only underscored the transformative potential of creative and music-infused teaching but also highlighted the value of collaborative learning among educators.

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework



Summary

This chapter introduced the pivotal role of music in early childhood education, emphasizing its influence on cognitive, emotional, social, and physical development. It highlights how music nurtured holistic growth and fostered lifelong learning while serving as a powerful medium for cultural expression. Despite extensive music training in Chinese pre-service education, a significant gap persisted—many educators struggle to translate their musical knowledge into effective and creative classroom practices. Drawing on my personal journey from a childhood immersed in sports and music in China to transformative teaching experiences in Canada and New York, this chapter illustrates the impact of educational methodologies on student engagement and overall well-being. It examines the limitations of rigid, standardized approaches in Chinese education and contrasts these with more dynamic, student-centered strategies derived from alternative models. Furthermore, the chapter explores innovative frameworks such as Education Through Music (ETM) and methods like Teacher Study Groups, which offer promising avenues to bridge this disconnect through reflective, creative teaching. With these foundational insights established, the next chapter will dive into the existing literature, providing a comprehensive review of research and theoretical perspectives that support these innovative educational approaches.

Chapter 2: Tracing the Ideas Behind This Study

Introduction

The profound impact of music and movement on early childhood development has been a subject of scholarly interest for decades (Custodero, 2005; Koops, 2014; Berger & Cooper, 2003), indeed since Plato (2004) and Rousseau (1899). However, exploring its complexity within educational settings remains an evolving practice (Dunbar-Hall, 2005). This dissertation delves into the intricate relationship between music, movement, and the holistic development of children in their formative years, focusing on how these elements can be integrated into pedagogical practices to foster a conducive learning environment that nurtures creativity, holistic growth and well-being (Allsup, 2016; Guhn et al., 2019).

This chapter provides a review of the literature surrounding the pivotal role of music and movement in the developmental journey of children from birth through the early years. Grounded in scholarly research and personal experience, it aims to elucidate the multifaceted impacts of music and movement experiences on young learners across physical, cognitive, social-emotional, and linguistic domains. The intrinsic musicality of children, coupled with their natural propensity for movement, forms the bedrock of this exploration, underpinning the thesis that early engagement with music and movement is not only beneficial but essential for holistic child development. Emerging from the premise that all children are inherently musical, this literature review navigates through empirical research, theoretical frameworks, and biography to advocate for the active inclusion of music and movement within early childhood education settings. Drawing from seminal works and recent studies alike, it presents an analysis of how these elements contribute to and enhance children's learning experiences and developmental outcomes at a critical phase of their growth.

In synthesizing the literature, this review also considers the pedagogical implications of integrating music and movement into early childhood language learning, especially from a constructivist, child-centered perspective. It discusses challenges educators face, including perceived barriers to music and movement integration and the importance of teacher training in overcoming these obstacles. Furthermore, the review reflects on cultural and systemic factors that influence the implementation of music and movement programs, particularly within the Chinese educational context. By offering an interpretation of the current state of research in this field, this chapter sets the stage for the subsequent examination of methodologies and practices that can incorporate music and movement into pedagogical strategies, specifically the teaching of English as a second language. In doing so, it aims to contribute to the ongoing dialogue on best practices in early childhood education, advocating for an approach that embraces the musical and physical dimensions of child development as central to fostering creative and well-rounded individuals. Having established the significance of music and movement in early childhood development, the next section delves into the inherent musicality of children, highlighting how their natural responsiveness to sound lays the foundation for further developmental growth.

1. Early Childhood Education

The Musical Nature of Children

All children are inherently musical (Trehub, 2003; Dissanayake, 1992; Blacking, 1973). Even in utero, "Homo Aestheticus" (Dissanayake, 1992) are acutely aware of the different sounds in their surroundings; they can respond to sounds or music and remember what they hear (DeCasper et al. 1994; Bauer 2006; Granier-Deferre et al. 2011). Children need to make music actively throughout their early years, and their spontaneous music-making is evident, omnipresent, and assuredly universal (Campbell, 2010; Custodero et al., 2016). Children's early

musical experiences help shape their musical and social identity and culture (Barrett, 2011), which I believe is in agreement with the Chinese proverb "三岁看大，七岁看老" (sān suì kàn dà, qī suì kàn lǎo), meaning a person's character and behaviors developed in the early years will determine what he or she will become in adulthood.

I begin this examination with the period of early childhood, defined as birth up to the age of eight, because it is considered the most important developmental phase throughout the lifespan (World Vision, n.d.). During these early years, children experience rapid growth in all physical, social-emotional, cognitive, language (and literacy) domains, each equally essential and fundamental. While much of children's development occurs at home, their school experiences later influence their progress and growth (Campbell, 2010). In his seminal work, Gardner (1983) posited the concept of Multiple Intelligences (MI), suggesting the existence of eight distinct types: visual-spatial, verbal-linguistic, logical-mathematical, interpersonal, intrapersonal, naturalistic, bodily-kinesthetic, and musical-rhythmic. MI-informed music instruction can act as a catalyst that not only engages musical-rhythmic intelligence but is associated with significant gains in several other intelligences (Ni et al., 2024). Music can foster cognitive, emotional, and social growth through its multidimensional nature, nurturing a well-rounded individual. Building on the understanding that children are naturally attuned to music from a very early age, I now explore how combining music with movement can further enrich their developmental journey, examining the synergistic effects of these elements on the whole child, across physical, cognitive, social-emotional, and linguistic domains.

Music and Movement on Whole Child Development

Arguably, among all subjects, music and movement stand out as uniquely powerful tools that support and enhance development across all domains (Berk, 2013; Shonkoff & Phillips,

2000). As we see later in this section, extensive research has revealed how music influences and scaffolds various aspects of early childhood (Custodero, 2005; Koops, 2014). The following section elucidates the significance of music in nurturing young children's growth. Regarding early childhood development, it is generally accepted that there are four primary developmental domains: physical, cognitive, social-emotional, and language (and literacy), or five domains if social and emotional are considered separately (Berk, 2013; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Research has underscored the profound impact of music and movement programs on these facets (Guhn et al., 2019). By seamlessly integrating music and movement into educational frameworks, educators effectively nurture holistic development across multiple domains, empowering young learners with essential skills and fostering a well-rounded foundation for lifelong success (Koops, 2014). To begin, I look at the tangible effects of music and movement on children's physical development. The integration of rhythmic activities and coordinated movements not only stimulates motor skills (Custodero, 2005) but also creates a dynamic learning environment that enhances physical growth.

Physical Development

In early childhood music education, incorporating children's movements is not just deemed necessary but vital; it transcends being a mere occasional experience. Consistent with this stance, Richards (1978) maintains, "The study of instrumental music should be preceded by song and movement and social interaction, for it is in this way that the music language is expressed" (p. 48). As Campbell and Scott-Kassner (2014) highlight, children extend heightened musical sensitivity when their innate movements are purposefully directed toward exploring or reinforcing musical elements and structures. The synergy of music and movement—through singing, performance, appreciation, and group activities—can enrich multiple intelligences (e.g.,

musical, bodily-kinesthetic, intrapersonal, linguistic, spatial, interpersonal) and support holistic development (Ni, Yang, & Liu, 2024). Music and movement have an extensive impact on children's physical growth and motor behavior. Numerous researchers have illuminated this phenomenon, finding that an integrated music and movement program yields superior results in enhancing young children's motor performance compared to a movement-only curriculum (Brown et al., 1981; Derri et al., 2001; Zachopoulou et al., 2004). Such programs improve physical dexterity and promote spatial awareness, balance, and overall motor proficiency through the harmonious interplay between rhythm, melody, and coordinated bodily movements.

Simultaneously, music and movement programs harbor the potential to enrich children's musical comprehension through movement. Utilizing Dalcroze eurhythmics in early childhood environments, researchers have unearthed evidence showcasing the efficacy of employing large motor movements (Juntunen, 2016; Sinaga, 2023). Such techniques aid children in recognizing and responding to unfamiliar rhythm patterns in music (Ferguson, 2005). Moreover, through these dynamic activities, children demonstrate marked improvements in improvisational skills and discernment of melodic nuances. By integrating movement as a vehicle for musical exploration, educators harness a powerful tool for nurturing children's innate musicality while strengthening a deeper understanding and appreciation of the intricate language of music. Psychomotor experiences in music education have also contributed to students' positive responses to music (Rohwer, 1998) and deepened their comprehension of musical elements (Cheek, 1979). Further substantiating these findings, a separate study revealed that students exhibited enhanced rhythmic acuity and sensory perception when educators integrated movement techniques into their instructional approaches (Rowen, 1967). By engaging students in active kinesthetic learning activities, educators can cultivate technical skills and foster a strong

connection to the expressive and structural dimensions of music. These findings underscore the vital role of psychomotor engagement in enriching students' musical journeys, offering a multifaceted approach to musical development. While the benefits of music and movement are evident in the realm of physical development, their influence extends beyond motor skills and serves as a powerful catalyst for cognitive development, enhancing memory, attention, and executive functions in young learners.

Cognitive Development

A substantial body of research underscores the profound impact of music on cognitive development and abilities. Studies by Bengtsson et al. (2005), Fujioka et al. (2006), Gaser and Schlaug (2003), Halwani et al. (2011), Hetland (2000), Ho et al. (2003), Hyde et al. (2009), Moreno and Besson (2006), Pantev et al. (2001), Paulson et al. (2013), Rickard et al. (2010), Schlaug et al. (2005), Seinfeld et al. (2013), Tierney et al. (2013), and Welch et al. (2015) have discovered various facets of this relationship. Through neuroscientific investigations, behavioral experiments, and longitudinal studies, these researchers have demonstrated how engagement with music can develop cognitive functions such as memory, attention, and executive function. Geist et al. (2012) investigated the cognitive advantages of integrating music and movement into mathematical learning experiences for preschoolers. In their experiment, the teacher implemented rhythmic activities and chants in one classroom to provide cognitive support for mathematical concepts. Remarkably, children in the rhythmic group exhibited significantly heightened levels of attention and engagement compared to their counterparts in the control group who were not exposed to these elements. As children became familiar with this new approach, they autonomously incorporated rhythmic support into their mathematical tasks, showcasing the skills transfer they had acquired.

Flaugnacco et al. (2015) compared cognitive performance among dyslexic children receiving music, art, or no training. The music group underwent a Kodály and Orff-based program focusing on temporal and rhythmic processing. Activities included rhythmic body movements, sensorimotor synchronization games, and percussive instrument use, with hour-long sessions conducted for over 30 weeks. Children's cognitive abilities and working memory were assessed, along with tasks evaluating music meter perception and rhythm reproduction, and the results indicated that the music group improved working memory, auditory attention, and rhythm perception more than the other groups did. Moreno et al. (2011) conducted a study to explore the connection between music training and cognitive development. Two programs were administered: one focused on music, and the other on visual art. Following the training period, only the music group showed better verbal intelligence, with 90% of participants demonstrating improvement! This finding correlated with changes in neural plasticity observed during an executive function task. The study concluded that music training could reinforce executive function and facilitate the transfer of high-level cognitive skills in early childhood. In addition to cognitive benefits, the interplay between music and movement plays a vital role in shaping children's social and emotional well-being. As we move forward, I examine how musical experiences foster interpersonal skills, self-regulation, and emotional intelligence.

Social and Emotional Development

Research findings reveal evidence regarding the positive impact of music activities on students' social and emotional development. Studies conducted by Broh (2002), Lillemyr (1983), Whitwell (1977), Marshall (1978), Costa-Giomi (1999), and Resnicow et al. (2004) have consistently shown that students engaged in music programs exhibit higher levels of self-esteem, motivation, positive self-attitudes, and emotional sensitivity. Furthermore, musical experiences

have been found to complement children's social-emotional capacities, as demonstrated by Moreno et al. (2011). Additional research conducted by Walter and Sat (2013), Arasomwan and Daries (2025), and Destiana, E. (2017) have further corroborated the affirmative influence and underscored the pivotal role of music in fostering emotional intelligence and interpersonal skills among young learners. Notably, children in music programs often use songs and musical activities as practical tools for behavior management and direction. Moreover, the studies indicate that prolonged engagement in such programs correlates with heightened levels of self-regulation, particularly evident in older age groups. Winsler et al. (2011) delved into the intricate interplay between early music and movement experiences, private speech usage, and behavioral self-regulation among preschool-aged children. Their findings illuminated a compelling relationship, demonstrating that participation in music and movement classes was correlated with notable enhancements in regulation skills and heightened usage of relevant private speech among children. The researchers postulated that the efficacy of these outcomes stemmed from the multifaceted nature of musical activities, which engaged children in diverse motor modulations and encouraged vocal expression by singing during various tasks. Beyond nurturing social and emotional growth, music also significantly influences language and literacy skills. The rhythmic patterns and melodic structures inherent in musical activities provide a robust framework for developing phonological awareness, vocabulary, and overall communication abilities.

Language and Literacy Development

The influence of music also extends to the development of language and literacy skills. Research conducted by Forgeard et al. (2008), Knight et al. (2016), Moreno et al. (2009), Roden et al. (2012), Creech et al. (2016), Gordon et al. (2015), Habib et al. (2016), and Saunders et al. (2014) has demonstrated the significant role of music in shaping linguistic abilities and literacy

acquisition. Through various mechanisms such as rhythmic patterns, melodic structures, and auditory processing, music serves as a powerful catalyst for language learning, enhancing phonological awareness, vocabulary acquisition, and reading comprehension in young learners. This convergence of evidence underscores the pivotal role of music in fostering comprehensive language and literacy skills and highlights its potential as a valuable tool in educational settings.

Augustine (2015) investigated the impact of music and movement on preschoolers' reading skills, focusing on their early literacy index, comprising print knowledge, definitional vocabulary, and phonological awareness. The intervention involved musical activities, including singing songs and nursery rhymes with body movements. The results showed that the music and movement program positively influenced preschoolers' reading skills, print knowledge, and definitional vocabulary. Yazejian and Peisner-Feinberg (2009) conducted a comprehensive investigation of the efficacy of a specialized music and movement curriculum in enhancing language proficiency among preschoolers. Following a six-month period, their study revealed compelling results: children in the intervention group demonstrated remarkable improvements in communication skills compared to their counterparts in the control group. This research underscores the potential of integrating music and movement into early childhood education, shedding light on the impact of music-based interventions on nurturing linguistic development and fostering practical communication skills in young learners.

Collectively, the evidence from the language and literacy studies, along with findings from the broader discussion on whole child development, highlights the multifaceted benefits of integrating music into early learning. These insights reveal that music and movement do more than support linguistic skills—they are essential to nurturing physical, cognitive, and socio-emotional growth during a critical developmental window. With this understanding, I now turn

my attention to a subsection titled “Music and Movement in Early Childhood,” where I explore how these practices are applied within educational settings to optimize holistic development and examine the challenges and opportunities that educators face in making music an integral part of the curriculum.

Music and Movement in Early Childhood

From the earlier discussions, it is not difficult to recognize the significance of music and movement in early childhood, the ‘prime time’ for children to undergo crucial development across the physical, social, emotional, cognitive, and linguistic domains. Literature spanning various developmental disciplines reveals a consistent narrative that well-structured music and movement programs positively influence holistic child development during this critical stage. Educators can effectively nurture young learners’ multifaceted growth by integrating music and movement into early childhood education. While children can reap the benefits of learning and playing music throughout their lives, the earlier they participate in music, the greater their rewards (Montessori, 1936). Age plays a critical role. This finding is consistent with cognitive science, developmental psychology, and the theory of sensitive periods, a term coined by Montessori. Beginning in early childhood, the brain naturally adopts a pruning system that follows the “use it or lose it” principle. This neurodevelopment process is known as synaptic pruning; neural connections stimulated and activated repeatedly are strengthened while neglected or unused connections dwindle (Chamberlain, 2008).

On the other hand, myelination, a neurodevelopment process championing so-called “practice makes perfect,” occurs when repeated stimulation reinforces neural connections, increasing the network’s speed and efficiency (Long & Corfas, 2014). These processes, together with the theory of sensitive periods in early childhood, are defined as a developmental timeframe

in which experience has long-lasting effects on the brain and behavior (Knudsen, 2004), suggesting that exposure to music in the lives of children should be maximized during their early days. Once children enter preschool, they spend a significant portion of their day in an early childhood setting. Therefore, the affordance or deprivation of musical experiences at school can impact children's musical and holistic development. Researchers have found that music activities, free music play, singing, dancing, and playing instruments all have significant benefits for young children and should be included in their general education (Feierabend, 1990; Jeanneret, 1997; Temmerman, 1997; Suthers, 2004; Persellin, 2007; Temmerman, 2006; deVries, 2006). These findings are also consistent with the stance of parents in different parts of the world who believe in the value of music education (Barrett, Flynn, & Welch, 2018).

While the significance of musical experiences is well documented, early childhood teachers responsible for providing these opportunities may be timid or feel unqualified to involve music in their interactions with children. Those who have studied music during their schooling years have a higher tendency to incorporate it (Kelly, 1998; Kim & Kemple, 2011; Ferris & Nyland, 2007). However, many others feel intimated or uninterested due to their perception of inadequate training (Gruenhagen, 2012), lack of confidence and competence (Suthers, 2004), or insignificance of music (Yazejian & Peisner-Feinberg, 2009). Early childhood generalists often rely on music specialists to carry out their responsibilities. However, specialists are shared by multiple classrooms and are not always available to children when needed the most. Therefore, to maximize children's musical experiences, it is generally accepted that preschool teachers should provide meaningful musical experiences and not merely play recorded music.

Furthermore, teachers may be unwilling to incorporate music because they prefer a particular teaching style in which they were trained. According to Barrett et al. (2019), educators

who spend more time in professional preparation and are taught formal pedagogical knowledge and techniques value traditional teaching methods over others. As Lortie (1975) suggested, teachers are accustomed to teaching in a way they have witnessed from their teachers when they were students, a phenomenon called the "apprenticeship of observation." Nevertheless, their preferences may not match children's learning styles and may be a roadblock to more creative pedagogical approaches. While these issues are prevalent globally (Honigsfeld & Schiering, 2004), they also hold true in the context of China. Despite the rich cultural heritage of music and movement in traditional Chinese education, modern early childhood education in China often faces similar challenges in effectively integrating these elements. The emphasis on academic achievement, particularly in subjects such as mathematics and language, has led to neglect of the arts, including music, in many preschool settings. Moreover, the pressure on early childhood educators to adhere strictly to prescribed curricula leaves little room for incorporating creative and expressive activities like music and movement. Consequently, children in China often miss out on the myriad benefits that music and movement programs and activities can offer during their crucial developmental years.

While the research on music and movement in early childhood clearly demonstrates the critical role these experiences play in fostering holistic development, the challenges of effectively integrating such practices into formal education persist. Traditional approaches to teaching and limited teacher preparedness can constrain the rich, integrative experiences that children need. At this juncture, the work of Randall Allsup (2016) becomes particularly illuminating. Although Randall's contributions span a broader educational context and are not solely focused on early childhood, his advocacy for a constructivist, student-centered approach—emphasizing creativity, collaboration, and reflective practice permeate his research (Allsup,

2016)—provides inspiring ideas that can be adapted to improve early childhood music education. By challenging the conventional conservatory-based model and proposing a more open and dynamic pedagogical framework, Randall offers a perspective that, when integrated with the established benefits of early childhood music and movement, can lead to more innovative and effective educational practices. This synthesis of ideas sets the stage for a closer examination of how Allsup's approach might be operationalized to overcome current challenges, particularly within the unique context of early childhood education in China.

My Experiences at Teachers College

In *Remixing the Classroom: Toward an Open Philosophy of Music Education*, Allsup (2016) challenges the traditional conservatory-based approach, advocating instead for a flexible and collaborative pedagogical model. My firsthand experience in Randall's classes at Teachers College—specifically "Creativity and Problem Solving in Music Education" and "Composing Collaboratively Across Diverse Styles"—brought his educational philosophy to life. Initially, coming from a traditional educational background, I felt out of place. Our classes were dynamic, conversation-based spaces where authority was decentralized, and student voices mattered as much as the instructor's. Instead of rigid lesson plans, we were encouraged to collaboratively explore, compose, and solve problems creatively, embodying Allsup's vision of students as co-creators rather than passive recipients of knowledge. When Covid-19 suddenly forced our classes onto Zoom, the need for creativity and openness intensified dramatically as we confronted challenges nobody anticipated. The abrupt shift to online emergency teaching profoundly affected how we interacted and learned together in Randall's courses.

During our Zoom sessions for "Creativity and Problem Solving in Music Education," the pandemic context made our collective explorations of uncertainty and improvisation more

relevant and poignant. I remember one class session where Randall encouraged us to openly discuss the vulnerabilities and anxieties we experienced due to isolation and disrupted routines. These conversations, deeply reflective and at times emotionally charged, demonstrated Randall's holistic approach, addressing not only our academic growth but also our emotional and psychological well-being. His compassionate pedagogy provided us with much-needed reassurance and fostered a powerful sense of community despite our physical separation. Our experiences in "Composing Collaboratively Across Diverse Styles" also shifted dramatically online. Before the pandemic, our face-to-face sessions had been rich with interactive improvisations and real-time feedback, creating a tangible sense of collective creativity. Moving onto Zoom initially felt restrictive and isolating. However, Randall transformed this challenge into a creative opportunity by encouraging us to compose collaboratively using digital tools. We experimented with platforms like Soundtrap and GarageBand, navigating technical glitches and asynchronous communication with encouragement and patience, and not a little fear. Randall frequently reminded us that discomfort and uncertainty were not obstacles to avoid but opportunities for genuine creative growth, a theme that foreshadows some of the findings of this study. The compositions we developed collaboratively online became uniquely reflective of our pandemic experiences—expressive pieces that incorporated diverse emotions and innovative digital techniques, exactly embodying Allsup's principle of creativity emerging from uncertainty.

My experiences in Professor Allsup's laboratory-style class and interactions with his philosophies formed one of the pillars for my dissertation, in which I attempted to bring a reflective and creative space to the participants. Drawing inspiration from the philosophical insights from thinkers as disparate as John Dewey and Roland Barthes, Allsup (2016) advocates for reflexive thinking and openness as foundational principles of education. This kind of

thinking, in Allsup's view, entails more than just critical analysis. It involves the willingness to suspend preconceived notions and embrace uncertainty, allowing for genuine inquiry and exploration. By cultivating a habit of reflective thinking, educators and students are encouraged to engage with ideas and experiences in a manner that promotes intellectual growth and self-awareness. Rather than passively accepting information, reflective thinkers actively question assumptions, challenge existing paradigms, and seek a deeper understanding through dialogue and experimentation. Through this challenging process, individuals develop the capacity to navigate complexity, adapt to change, and make informed decisions in both academic and real-world contexts. Randall's advocacy for critical thinking underscores the transformative potential of education as a journey of self-discovery and continual learning, where curiosity and inquiry serve as guiding forces toward deeper understanding and personal fulfillment.

Allsup's (2016) stance on embracing discomfort and uncertainty in pursuit of meaningful learning experiences offers valuable insights for the adaptation and inclusion of these ideas in teacher training and professional development programs. Educator preparation should emphasize the cultivation of reflective thinking and openness as foundational principles. Training programs should encourage future educators to confront the tensions between tradition and innovation, challenging them to navigate ambiguity and complexity with confidence. In Allsup's terms, this tension is constitutive of education itself: "There is no education without innovation. There is no education without tradition." (Allsup, 2016, p. 40). By incorporating opportunities for prospective teachers to engage with discomfort and uncertainty in their own learning journeys, training programs can equip them with the skills and mindsets needed to facilitate similar experiences for their future students. Emphasizing the importance of creating environments that foster curiosity, critical thinking, and creativity prepares educators to effectively navigate the

dynamic landscape of education and adapt to learners' diverse needs (Allsup & Benedict, 2008). Aspiring teachers should be encouraged to embrace discomfort as a catalyst for growth, recognizing that meaningful learning often occurs at the intersection of challenges and discoveries. Through intentional reflection and ongoing professional development, educators can continually refine their practices and create more inclusive and engaging learning experiences for all students.

Drawing inspiration from Professor Allsup's ideas, reflecting on my visits to early childhood classrooms throughout China revealed that rich, integrative experiences in music and movement were often missing. In many settings, musical activities were limited to a teacher playing the piano to lead a song while children remained seated and passive—hardly the dynamic, engaging experience that Randall envisions. Although children naturally sing and dance at home or in public (Custodero, 2006; Custodero et al., 2016), in formal educational spaces, they are frequently deprived of the strategic, teacher-designed musical experiences that nurture holistic development. Interestingly, Chinese preschool generalists often receive training in music and dance during their college education, yet the implementation in classrooms tends to be constrained by traditional practices. With optimism and inspiration from Randall's constructivist, student-centered approach, I continued my investigation into how music and movement can be more effectively integrated into early childhood settings in China.

This inquiry naturally led to a broader consideration of the educational context in which these innovations are introduced. The Chinese education system, with its highly centralized, examination-driven framework, plays a pivotal role in shaping pedagogical practices. In the next section, I explore the structure and dynamics of the Chinese education system to better

understand the challenges and opportunities that influence the integration of creative, music-based learning experiences in early childhood education.

2. The Chinese Context

Chinese Education System

The Chinese education system is highly centralized, competitive, and frankly effective, emphasizing rigorous testing that warrants rote memorization. Because students' scores on the national college entrance examination, called the Gaokao, largely determine university placement—and thereby shape subsequent academic and career pathways—students face intense pressure to perform (Bai, Chi, & Qian, 2014; Cheng & Hamid, 2025). Having grown up within this overwhelming system, I know firsthand how the relentless focus on test scores seemingly permeates everyday classroom dynamics, where creative thinking is frequently sidelined in favor of reproducing memorized content. As Allsup observes, students' obedience and efficiency often translate into teacher control: "Children don't follow their own thoughts so much as they follow ours. A classroom divisible by seconds is a classroom of overwhelming control" (Allsup, 2016, p. 66). Criticisms often arise regarding the Chinese system's narrow focus on examination results at the expense of creativity and critical thinking (Mullen, 2017). Central and centralized control is a defining feature of the Chinese education system, epitomized by the hierarchical structure of governance and regulatory oversight. At the national level, the Ministry of Education has formulated comprehensive policies and guidelines that govern educational practices nationwide (Liu, 2021). These policies are then implemented and enforced by provincial and municipal authorities, who adapt them to local contexts and ensure compliance within their respective jurisdictions. Reflecting on my own education in China, I know that this top-down approach, while ensuring a unified curriculum, left little space for teacher autonomy to foster critical and

creative skills. This standardized approach facilitates curriculum development, resource allocation, and quality assurance, though it sometimes struggles to address regional disparities and to meet diverse needs at the grassroots level.

The examination-oriented culture prevalent in Chinese education underscores the pivotal role of standardized assessments, notably exemplified by the Gaokao, in shaping students' academic trajectories and prospects. The singular focus on examination performance engenders a highly competitive environment in which students face substantial pressure to excel (Cheng & Hamid, 2025; Zhao, 2015). From my personal perspective, I witnessed how peers and teachers alike internalized this pressure, often leading to a classroom atmosphere where any kind of creative process took a back seat to test preparation and memorization drills. Students were lauded for their memorization and recitation, which showed up on high test scores, rather than creative thoughts. This emphasis on test outcomes not only influences pedagogical practices and curricular design but also permeates societal norms, reinforcing the idea that academic success is paramount to individual achievement, social mobility, and even morality. High school education in China, especially at the senior high school level, is pivotal to students' academic trajectories, culminating in a highly competitive national college entrance examination (the Gaokao). This phase is marked by a rigorous academic program designed to equip students with the requisite knowledge for higher education. The Chinese dual-track system, comprising academic and vocational high schools, reflects efforts to accommodate diverse student aspirations and talents, even though quality disparities continue to prompt calls for reform (Chen, Fu, & Pan, 2019; Yi et al., 2018).

Primary education in China spans six years and caters to children aged 6-12. This foundational stage of schooling focuses on acquiring essential literacy, numeracy, and ethical

values. Core subjects such as Chinese language, mathematics, arts, music, and physical education are central to the curriculum. During my early schooling, I remember that while creative subjects were included, there were instances when non-academic subjects were sidelined to prioritize exam-related content, hinting at early compromises between holistic development and academic rigor. Throughout the compulsory education continuum, there has been an emphasis on instilling core values and social responsibilities alongside academic knowledge (Qiu, 2024). Beyond academics, the system stresses the cultivation of discipline, respect for authority, patriotism, and moral integrity. Recent government-led initiatives aim to upgrade compulsory education to better emphasize holistic development, equitable access to resources, and continual refinement of pedagogical practices (Liu, 2021; Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2012). However, I strongly believe that substantial work remains to be done to achieve transformative change. As China's economic influence expands on the world stage, its education system has begun a deliberate process of internationalization. Such internationalization is evident in initiatives to strengthen students' global competencies, promote cross-cultural understanding, improve English language proficiency, and forge collaborative partnerships with overseas institutions (Zhu, 2019; Zou et al., 2024)

While the Chinese education system is characterized by centralized control, a strong emphasis on standardized testing, and a competitive academic environment, its influence begins at the earliest stages of education. Early childhood education in China is where the seeds of holistic development can be sown. As I explore further, it is clear that despite the overarching focus on examination outcomes in later stages, early childhood education attempts to support multifaceted developmental goals, setting a foundation for lifelong learning and adaptability. My own observations in early education underscored the tension within traditional exam-driven

practices, requiring students "to learn about" the academic subjects, and the situation is not bleak, or fixed. There are emerging trends aimed at fostering a more balanced, creative, and holistic approach to child development—a theme that continues to evolve as reforms progress in China.

Early Childhood Education in China

Early childhood education (ECE) in China encompasses structured programs provided by preschools and nurseries. These institutions play a crucial role in nurturing the cognitive, socio-emotional, language, and physical development of children aged 3 to 6. Chinese public preschools promote many play-based learning experiences within the ECE framework that look to facilitate exploration, creativity, and social interaction (Bullough & Palaiologou, 2019). Private programs often integrate lessons and activities aimed at improving language proficiency and early numeracy skills, preparing students for the academic rigor of formal schooling. In recent years, there has been a growing recognition of the importance of early childhood education as a critical component of the education system. The long-term benefits of high-quality ECE in fostering cognitive skills, social-emotional competence, and school readiness among young learners are gradually more understood by the public.

Consequently, there has been increasing emphasis on integrating ECE into the broader educational continuum, promoting continuity and coherence in children's educational experiences from preschool through primary and secondary levels. The Chinese government, like many governments and institutions around the world, has made concerted efforts to bolster investment in ECE, recognizing its pivotal role in laying the foundation for subsequent academic achievement and holistic development (Li et al., 2016). These efforts include initiatives to expand access to affordable, high-quality ECE services, particularly in rural and underserved

areas. Additionally, the government has implemented policies to enhance the professional qualifications of ECE educators, ensuring that they possess the necessary training and expertise to effectively support children's early learning and development.

Yet, with additional help from the government and professional development, educational delivery remains a work in progress. I recall my recent visits to some preschools, especially in Chinese cities similar to the context of my dissertation, where the classroom facilities, play areas, and educational materials were top-notch, but the teaching style remained very traditional: the teacher stood at the front delivering lectures while 3-year-old students sat on small plastic chairs, passively listening (or not). Having examined the structure and objectives of early childhood education in China—where play-based learning and holistic development are increasingly valued—it is essential to consider the role of educators in this process. The effectiveness of early childhood programs largely depends on the quality and preparedness of the teachers who implement them. In my personal observations, I believe the passion and dedication of these educators were evident. However, they need more help and tools that not only update their pedagogical techniques but also support them to transition from a lecture-based approach to more interactive, student-centered methods. Teachers have expressed to me a desire for ongoing professional development, access to innovative instructional resources, and mentoring networks that offer guidance on implementing student-centered practices in the classroom, even though they should be quite equipped with both theoretical knowledge and practical skills to foster dynamic and developmentally appropriate learning environments.

Teacher Training Programs in ECE

The training of preschool educators in China is orchestrated through structured educational institutions that adhere to established pedagogical frameworks. Prospective

educators complete comprehensive academic programs—typically a bachelor's degree or specialized certification in early childhood education—from accredited universities or colleges to meet professional qualification standards (Bullough & Palaiologou, 2019). Through such formalized educational pathways, candidates understand the foundational principles that underpin early childhood pedagogy. An integral part of the training regimen for preschool educators involves integrating practical experiences to complement theoretical learning. Preservice teacher education in China typically includes school-based practicum in schools that link coursework with real classrooms, giving trainees sustained opportunities to apply pedagogical theory in practice (Liang, Kidwai, & Zhang, 2016). These experiential learning opportunities are intended to enable candidates to refine their instructional techniques, foster meaningful interactions with young learners, and navigate the diverse challenges encountered within educational contexts. Ideally, the amalgamation of theoretical knowledge and practical applications would augment the holistic development of prospective preschool educators. However, during my visits, I observed "trainee" teachers struggling to balance applying their theoretical knowledge with the unpredictable nature of young children's behavior. But this effort is universal, I think.

In tandem with theoretical instruction and practical exposure, preschool teacher training programs in China emphasize the cultivation of core competencies essential for effective pedagogical practice. Teacher training courses typically cover child psychology, early childhood education methods, early literacy and numeracy education, the arts (including music), and physical activities (Hu & Szente, 2009), more varied, I believe, than most North American preparation programs. These diverse courses aim to provide preschool teachers with a comprehensive educational background and professional knowledge. Beyond acquiring subject-

specific knowledge, emphasis is also placed on interpersonal skills, such as effective communication and empathetic engagement with children. Although their counterparts in the rest of the world often lament their lack of training (Bautista et al., 2024), early childhood teachers in China rarely graduate from their teaching preparation programs without exposure to music learning (Hu & Szente, 2009). Courses providing knowledge and training in music theory, vocal methods, piano playing, dance techniques, nursery rhyme repertoires, and music teaching pedagogy are often mandatory. For degree programs that do not set such requirements, these classes are usually available as electives, including ear training and sight-reading. While they should be prepared to adopt music in their teaching, many teachers surprisingly shared reservations and feelings of inadequacy. I remember talking with a former colleague at Teachers College who admitted that despite completing these courses, she still felt woefully underprepared when trying to integrate music into daily lessons, revealing a gap between training and confident classroom application. Furthermore, teachers who are pressured to use music to fulfill organizational and curricular goals may resort to a traditional teaching style that is heavily teacher-centered and developmentally inappropriate.

Overall, the pedagogical paradigm in Chinese education has historically been characterized by an emphasis on rote memorization and passive learning, eliciting criticism of its perceived hindrance to developing critical thinking and creativity among students. While recent educational reforms have endeavored to advance a more innovative and holistic approach to learning, entrenched Confucian norms and the enduring influence of examination-centric pressures persist as formidable challenges—even at the early childhood level, as some elementary schools now require entrance examinations (Yu & Suen, 2005). Despite concerted efforts to promote student-centered methodologies and experiential learning, the prevailing

emphasis on standardized testing and academic performance often impedes the widespread adoption of practices conducive to nurturing creative thought, as is true everywhere I suppose. In private conversations, veteran educators have expressed frustration over the lack of resources and time to innovate, as they must meet the rigorous demands of standardized assessments while trying to implement more engaging teaching strategies.

While comprehensive teacher training programs provide the foundational skills and pedagogical strategies for early childhood education, the practical application of these competencies is guided by established policy frameworks. In China, official guidelines for preschool education articulate the specific aims and methodologies that educators must employ to nurture children's holistic development. The review of these teacher guidelines highlights how they are intended to inform day-to-day practices and support educators in creating vibrant, inclusive, and creative learning environments that extend beyond mere academic instruction.

Teacher Guidelines for Early Childhood Education

The Guidelines for Preschool Education regulate the early childhood teaching profession in China (Rao, Zhou & Sun, 2017). According to the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China (2012), these guidelines stipulate that preschool education must align with national educational policies, uphold the principle of integrating care with education, and implement comprehensive educational strategies to nurture young children's physical, intellectual, moral, and aesthetic growth. The scope of kindergarten education is extensive and enlightening, encompassing five primary dimensions: health, social, scientific, linguistic, and artistic, which can be further delineated based on children's learning activities (Fu, Zhao & Qin, 2024). Each dimension is expected to encompass various facets of learning, including knowledge acquisition, skill development, emotional attitudes, and activity methodologies. In addition,

according to the Guidelines, young children's learning is holistically integrated, not confined to discrete curriculum categories (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2012). The integration and adaptation of instructional content should be tailored to the distinctive learning characteristics of young children, fostering vivid, active, and meaningful learning experiences grounded in real-world activities (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2012). This approach facilitates the acquisition of comprehensive experiences, thereby promoting the harmonious development of children's physical and mental faculties.

Concerning the teaching of the arts, the Guidelines emphasize that directing children toward encountering pleasant and poignant experiences is imperative for augmenting their sensory and emotional encounters. For instance, they recommend fostering an appreciation of various art forms and stimulating children's interest in both appreciating and creating beauty (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2012). Furthermore, educators are advised to provide ample opportunities for uninhibited expression, encouraging children to utilize diverse artistic media to articulate their experiences, emotions, and perceptions. The Guidelines further specify that art serves as a vital channel for children to convey their understanding and emotions, thus necessitating a pedagogical approach centered on facilitating meaningful encounters with aesthetic stimuli. Teachers are urged to design joyful, interest-driven arts experiences that respect children's individuality and avoid reducing art to technical drills (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2012). By adhering to these guidance points, early childhood educators can effectively nurture children's artistic sensibilities while fostering creative expression and cultural appreciation.

Overall, attaining preschool education objectives relies on teachers' deliberate and systematic organization of educational activities that promote active participation and generate

beneficial learning experiences across the physical, intellectual, moral, and aesthetic domains within the kindergarten setting (Fu et al., 2024). Central to the organization and implementation of education is the creative agency of teachers, who must devise pragmatic and adaptable work plans informed by both the guidelines and the unique context of their students. Such plans should be executed flexibly, acknowledging the dynamic nature of the educational environment. Educators must adhere to the guidelines while navigating "dialectical" principles when selecting educational content. These principles, as highlighted in the Guidelines (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2012), stipulate that content should resonate with children's interests and prior experiences while introducing novel stimuli conducive to learning. Furthermore, activities should connect with children's daily lives and lay a strong foundation for subsequent school learning by fostering positive approaches to learning, rather than importing primary-grade curricula. These activities should respect young children's individual characteristics and preferred approaches, prioritize holistic and integrated learning, and remain play-based and connected to daily life, in rich, engaging environments that foster joyful learning (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2012).

While the teacher guidelines for early childhood education are well intended and offer a holistic framework that aims to promote creative, child-centered learning experiences that nurture children's development, in practice many teachers find themselves grappling with significant challenges. More likely than not, Chinese teachers struggle to meet these standards. For instance, the gap between policy and practice is often widened by factors such as large class sizes, limited resources, and persistent emphasis on academic outcomes that can overshadow more creative, integrative approaches (Bullough & Palaiologou, 2019). Moreover, while the guidelines emphasize a broad, inclusive approach to development, many teachers report feeling

underprepared—particularly in areas like music integration—even after receiving some training during their education (You et al., 2025). This disconnect highlights the need for ongoing professional development, better support systems, and perhaps a more realistic alignment of guidelines with the practical realities of classroom environments (Barrett et al., 2019).

In addition, Chinese early childhood educators often must implement a school-based curriculum that is prescribed by higher authorities. Often, a prescribed curriculum constrains teachers' ability to tailor lessons to local and student needs (Cui et al., 2018). With its rigid structure and emphasis on standardized assessments, it frequently limits adaptation to students' unique needs and interests—a lament I often hear from more experienced educators. As we move into the next section, it becomes clear that this tension between ideal guidelines and the realities of mandated curricular frameworks has a profound impact on classroom practice. The prescribed curriculum not only curtails creative pedagogical approaches but also forces teachers to balance their professional and pedagogical aspirations with the demands of a one-size-fits-all model. In the following discussion, I will examine how the constraints of the prescribed curriculum affect teaching practices, highlighting both the challenges it poses to foster creativity and the potential opportunities for innovation within its structure.

Prescribed Curriculum

Although they are equipped with much knowledge and training, maybe more than most early education educators worldwide, most Chinese early childhood teachers are predominantly tasked with navigating and implementing a school-based curriculum crafted or purchased by school authorities everywhere I visited. Prescribed curricula have been scrutinized regarding their impact on the creativity of teaching practices (Cui et al., 2018). One notable concern is the potential limitation of the flexibility inherent in adhering to a predetermined curriculum.

Teachers may find themselves constrained by prescribed topics and methods, impeding their ability to adapt lessons to their students' unique needs and interests. This restriction on flexibility may hinder the exploration of creative pedagogical approaches in the classroom. Moreover, prescribed curricula often prioritize standardized testing and compliance with educational standards, which can further stifle creativity in teaching (Cheung, 2017). The emphasis on standardized assessments may discourage educators from experimenting with innovative teaching methods or deviating from the established curriculum. Consequently, this focus on conformity to standardized measures may restrict opportunities for teachers to engage students creatively in the learning process.

Additionally, the one-size-fits-all nature of many prescribed curricula poses challenges in accommodating students' diverse learning styles and abilities. Teachers may struggle to adapt the curriculum to meet their students' individual needs. As a result, limited flexibility within the prescribed curriculum may inhibit educators from employing creative strategies to cater to their classrooms' varying learning preferences and abilities (Cheung, 2017), to say nothing of university preparation programs where creativity is modeled and experienced, as with Randall's classes. Nevertheless, it is essential to acknowledge that prescribed curricula also provide structure and guidance to teachers, particularly to those requiring support in curriculum planning (Cui et al., 2018). Despite the constraints imposed by a predetermined curriculum, I strongly believe that educators can still infuse creativity into their teaching practices by incorporating engaging activities, real-world examples, and student-centered approaches.

These inherent challenges in the prescribed curriculum highlight a critical need for innovative approaches that can bridge the gap between rigid educational mandates and the creative needs of today's classrooms. In the next section, we explore a section titled "Bringing

Music, Movement and Play to Pedagogy." As discussed earlier, music and movement have the potential to enhance teaching and learning at the early childhood level. The teacher study group in this study focused on how Chinese educators might harness music, particularly singing, along with movement and play, to enrich their pedagogical practices. By examining innovative, scientifically grounded strategies for integrating these dynamic elements into the curriculum, we can begin to address the challenges posed by a one-size-fits-all approach and open up new avenues for holistic and creative learning experiences.

3. Bringing Music, Movement, and Play to Pedagogy

As discussed earlier, music and movement have the potential to enhance teaching and learning at the early childhood level (Custodero et al., 2016; Barrett et al., 2019). Increasingly, there have been deliberate efforts to innovate teaching methodologies, including integrating music and play elements into instructional practices (Suthers, 2004; Kim & Kemple, 2011). This strategic move aims to holistically elevate the quality of classroom teaching and learning experiences, aligning with students' evolving needs and expectations in the modern era (Campbell & Scott-Kassner, 2014). However, amidst this endeavor, it is evident that a significant proportion of educators encounter challenges in effectively incorporating music and play components into their teaching repertoire (You et al., 2025). Despite recognizing the potential benefits of these innovative approaches, some teachers struggle to integrate them seamlessly with substantive educational content. This lack of seamless integration undermines intended pedagogical outcomes and may hinder the realization of the full potential of music and play as educational tools.

To address the gap between intention and execution, it is imperative to emphasize the importance of scientifically grounded pedagogical strategies when implementing music and play

elements in educational settings (Barrett et al., 2019). Teachers need adequate support and training to develop the requisite skills and knowledge to integrate these elements cohesively into the curriculum. Additionally, fostering collaboration and exchange among educators can facilitate the sharing of best practices and insights, promoting more effective implementation of music and play in teaching praxis (Suthers, 2004). Building on the idea that integrating music, movement, and play can transform early childhood pedagogy, it becomes essential to examine one of the most accessible and impactful elements of this approach—singing. As a universal activity that naturally engages children, singing specifically offers a gateway into understanding how music can serve as a catalyst for social, emotional, and cognitive development (Custodero et al., 2016). In the following section, we turn our focus to the role of singing in education and explore its unique potential to enrich classroom experiences.

Singing

As noted earlier regarding the developmental benefits of music and movement, singing also merits recognition as a standalone subject—"the song experience … is a necessary and basic discipline in everyone's education" (Richards, 1984, p. 2). Singing, often perceived as a universal activity, has the potential to facilitate positive social interaction and personal development. However, these benefits are not inherent, as they require deliberate attention to context and pedagogical approach (Gordon, 2012). Children, in particular, readily engage in spontaneous singing through familiar tunes or newly created melodies, underscoring their inclusive nature within human expression (Custodero et al., 2016). Moreover, the association between singing and pleasurable circumstances underscores its intrinsic appeal across various social and cultural contexts (Barrett, 2011). Songs, with their inherent ability to evoke emotions, memories, and feelings, serve as powerful conduits for personal expression and introspection

(Berk, 2009). This capacity is accentuated by the role of emotions in the learning process and classroom dynamics, where songs can elucidate complex emotional states and foster empathetic connections among learners (Suthers, 2004; Gordon, 2012). Additionally, the interplay between singing—particularly song games—and social experiences underscores its multifaceted nature, encompassing social interaction, language development, and cognitive engagement (Custodero et al., 2016). Harnessing the socializing potential of singing can effectively cultivate conducive learning environments, shaping students' attitudes toward collaboration and enhancing their interpersonal skills.

Language, which is intrinsic to the fabric of songs, underscores the symbiotic relationship between singing and linguistic development. Songs serve as immersive language experiences that facilitate vocabulary acquisition, linguistic creativity, and cultural understanding (Knight et al., 2016). Moreover, the cognitive demands inherent in singing—especially when fully engaging physical, affective, and cognitive processes—underscore its role in stimulating cognitive exploration and problem-solving (Hyde et al., 2009). Richards (1984) summarizes this child-centered mechanism for musical thinking:

> The tools for exploring a song, and all music, are within the child. They can be activated and become useful through positive experiences with singing. One of the first needs is to be able to use the language and music tool which is called "inner hearing"—the ability to hear language and music in one's mind. (p. 18).

By coordinating actions with melodies to create interpretations and rhymes, singing provides fertile ground for enhancing creative expression and critical thinking (Moreno et al., 2009). Furthermore, the communal nature of singing fosters trust, cooperation, and mutual support among participants, encouraging active engagement as individuals collaborate to create

harmonious musical experiences (Winsler et al., 2011). The synchrony required in moving and singing in unison cultivates sequencing, timing, and coordination skills, thereby enhancing learners' abilities to navigate complex social interactions and collaborative endeavors (Gordon, 2012). Having explored the multifaceted benefits of singing—from enhancing language skills to fostering social interaction—the discussion now broadens to consider the element of play. While singing on its own is a powerful tool, combining it with play transforms the activity into a dynamic, interactive experience. The integration of playful elements not only boosts engagement but also supports creative expression and learning. The next section delves into how singing and play together create a rich, multidimensional pedagogical tool.

Singing and Play

In education, the historical perception of play differs significantly from contemporary understanding. Traditionally, schools have emphasized work over play, relegating the latter to brief recess or extracurricular slots, despite extensive evidence of play's importance. Traditionally, schools have emphasized work over play, relegating the latter to recess or extracurricular activities (Miller & Almon, 2009). However, in the 1950s, scholars began advocating for recognizing play as integral to children's educational development. Despite lingering reservations among some educators and parents regarding play activities during school hours, there is growing acknowledgment that play is not antithetical to work; instead, it is the work of children. This shift in perspective underscores the importance of guided play in facilitating learning opportunities (Weisberg et al., 2016). Numerous songs and singing experiences exhibit overt play characteristics and serve as valuable tools in educational contexts. Certain songs are crafted to encourage students to engage in physical actions, while others involve role-playing or dramatization, fostering imaginative storytelling. Some songs include

chase and word games, each catering to different playful inclinations and areas of development. In addition, various songs are deeply emotive, weaving stories that evoke strong feelings, challenging their categorization as merely playful.

Overall, the majority of songs and singing experiences possess playful qualities that facilitate imagination, social interactions, and curiosity. Incorporating elements of play into singing activities enriches the overall learning experience by engaging learners dynamically and interactively. As Richards (1978) underscores, "it is necessary that the child be given chances to be introduced to art, and it must be on his own level through play" (p. 1). Singing activities with playful characteristics stimulate auditory, visual, and motor engagement, providing fertile ground for sensory integration and coordination (Richards, 1978). This holistic approach to singing achieves educational goals and sustains learners' interests and enjoyment, highlighting the power and potential of singing as a versatile educational tool. The synergy between singing and play sets the stage for deeper linguistic and cognitive development (Chen-Hafteck, 2018). Building on the playful, interactive nature of singing activities, we now explore how these practices further enhance language acquisition and creative expression. By embedding language within the playful framework of songs, educators can foster a more inclusive and engaging learning environment. In the next section, we examine the interconnection of singing, play, and language, and how this triad enriches the educational experience.

Singing, Play, and Language

Songs offer rich opportunities for linguistic creativity, encompassing various forms of language play such as rhyming, action description, and personalization through names (Custodero et al., 2016). By incorporating student names into songs, educators can create a personalized experience, signaling the significance of each individual within the group (Suthers,

2004). Name games, in which individual names are sung and acknowledged, not only facilitate acquaintance among students but also foster a sense of inclusivity and warmth within the classroom environment (Barrett et al., 2019). Furthermore, songs often prompt physical engagement through descriptions of actions; the lyrics guide accompanying movements, fostering opportunities for students to articulate descriptive language while actively participating in the song's motions (Richards, 1978). Allowing students to contribute words that match the actions encourages linguistic expression and empowers them to personalize their experiences with the songs (Bennett, 1987).

Moreover, the lyrical nature of songs provides a platform for exploring rhymes, enhancing students' understanding of phonetic patterns and wordplay (Richards, 1984; Sweeney, 2002). Games that encourage students to generate new verses adhering to established rhyming schemes promote creativity within structured linguistic frameworks, enabling learners to refine their rhyming skills and develop an appreciation for the poetic elements inherent in song lyrics (Richards, 1978). Research on incorporating music and movement into early childhood classrooms holds significant promise for enhancing creativity in teaching and learning (Hyde et al., 2009). The multifaceted nature of songs, play, and language, highlighted by diverse opportunities for linguistic exploration and musical engagement, underscores the potential efficacy of integrating these elements into educational practices (Moreno et al., 2009). By leveraging the inherent appeal of music and movement, educators can create dynamic learning environments that stimulate creativity, foster language development, and promote social interactions among young learners (Knight et al., 2016). Thus, further investigation into integrating music and movement into early childhood education will enrich pedagogical approaches and contribute to the holistic development of children.

As we have seen, the interplay of singing, play, and language creates numerous opportunities for holistic development in early childhood. However, translating these promising approaches into consistent classroom practice requires careful consideration of pedagogical strategies. The challenges of integrating these dynamic elements into everyday teaching call for innovative instructional methods and well-supported teacher training. The next section addresses these practical pedagogical considerations, focusing on how educators can implement music-based activities despite existing constraints.

4. Mary Helen Richards

In recent years, there has been a shift in early childhood music instruction in China, where piano proficiency has long been a central qualification criterion for educators. This traditional emphasis contrasts sharply with the pedagogical insights that emerged in the 1960s when prominent Hungarian music educator Zoltán Kodály introduced an alternative approach in the United States. Kodály described the human voice as the most natural and accessible instrument (Sheridan, 2018). Richards (1984) makes the same point: “Everyone has a natural clear free voice that can do a great variety of things, and it is this voice together with the body that is the child's first instrument” (p. 14). Although many schools worldwide have gradually moved away from heavy reliance on pianos (Richards, 1978), Chinese preschools continue to favor them, irrespective of teachers’ keyboard proficiency. Yet, a growing body of research suggests that effective song instruction benefits from minimal dependence on instruments, emphasizing instead the roles of both educators and students as active vocal participants (Richards, 1978; Suthers, 2004). This approach not only promotes a more accessible and equitable form of music-making but also lays the groundwork for innovative pedagogical practices. However, common expectations run contrary: “Music for most of us on this continent

has always been synonymous with playing instruments. Becoming proficient in music has always been an 'active' project. That is, the 'would-be' musician plays an instrument" (Richards, 1980, p. 4).

The communicative potency of songs often lies in their lyrical content, which narrates stories, depicts characters, or conveys emotions, thereby imprinting memorable impressions on listeners (Richards, 1984; Sweeney, 2002). The linguistic expressions embedded within songs channel and concentrate cognitive focus on particular subjects or sentiments—a phenomenon observed across diverse age groups, from children to adults, who derive pleasure and enrichment from the language acquired through musical engagement (Barrett et al., 2019). Beyond the intrinsic musical and linguistic qualities of songs, the manner in which educators introduce and facilitate song activities plays a pivotal role in arousing student interest and fostering meaningful engagement (Bennett, 1987). As Richards (1978) argues, "In the experience of music the wholeness of the experience must come first" (p. 13). Songs that allow for personal expression or choices within a thoughtfully contextualized framework resonate more deeply and hold greater relevance for learners. Moreover, the quality of vocal production—characterized by buoyancy, pleasantness, and apparent ease—influences students' receptiveness to singing activities, with strained or coarse vocalizations likely dampening their enthusiasm (Suthers, 2004). When songs are relegated to superficial roles and not valued for their intrinsic worth, their effectiveness as educational tools becomes constrained.

Reflecting on the pedagogical challenges and opportunities presented by innovative music integration, it is instructive to look back at influential figures who have reshaped music education and contributed to my teaching. Mary Helen Richards is one such pioneer whose work has paved the way for transformative approaches in teaching music. Her contributions, which

evolved from early influences and groundbreaking adaptations of Kodály's methods, offer valuable insights into overcoming traditional limitations in the classroom (Bennett, 1987). The following section introduces Mary Helen Richards and examines her enduring impact on music education.

My exploration of singing, movement, and play eventually led me to the discovery of Mary Helen Richards and her pioneering work with SongWorks (Bennett & Bartholomew, 1997). Mary Helen Richards (1921–1998) was an influential music educator who established the foundation for Education Through Music (ETM) after being inspired by Kodály. Her journey into music education began in earnest in 1958, a period marked by a national shift in priorities following the Soviet Union's launch of Sputnik, which redirected American educational focus toward math and science (Bennett, 1987). This emphasis on STEM inadvertently contributed to the declining support for arts programs, sparking Richards's concern and motivating her to explore innovative, arts-based pedagogies. An article in the Christian Science Monitor detailing Kodály's unique approach in Hungary prompted her to send a postcard inquiry—"How do you teach music?"—which became the catalyst for her transformative work in music education (Bennett, 1987). Throughout her early career, Richards not only embraced Kodály's principles but also engaged in reflective practice by continually assessing and revising her methods in response to the challenges she encountered. Her willingness to question traditional norms and learn from her mistakes laid the groundwork for a resilient, adaptive approach that would later define ETM.

Through extensive correspondence with Kodály, Richards received foundational method books that she later adapted into instructional charts for music education at the Portola Valley School in California (Bennett, 1987). These early adaptations marked the nascent stages of what

would become “Threshold to Music,” an embryonic form of ETM that integrated not only technical methods but also a reflective process of trial and error. During this period, Richards diligently documented her successes and setbacks, viewing mistakes not as failures but as essential learning opportunities that refined her pedagogical approach. Richards (1978) frames ETM as empirical, child-centered practice: “An approach to the philosophy of ETM must… be built on evidence that can be seen and heard and felt in the classrooms with children.” (p. 2). Her reflective practice allowed her to adapt Kodály’s ideas to better suit the cultural and educational landscape of American classrooms. In 1962, a visit to Hungary deepened her understanding of music pedagogy, as she observed the Hungarian emphasis on teaching music “with love”—a principle that underscored the importance of creating nurturing, supportive learning environments (Richards, 1966). This experience further instilled in her the value of personal expression and the need for a curriculum that responded to students’ cultural backgrounds and emotional well-being. Ultimately, her methodical reflection and readiness to embrace and learn from mistakes became cornerstones of her transformative contribution to music education.

Richards’s pivotal encounter with Kodály in July 1962 marked a turning point in her career as he reviewed her instructional charts and offered critical suggestions to integrate children’s cultural heritage into music education through folk songs. Kodály’s advice emphasized not only the importance of daily musical engagement but also the need to understand the “movement” of language, an insight that underscored how music could organize cognitive and emotional experiences (Choksy, 1988). These discussions reinforced Richards’s belief in the importance of adapting pedagogical models to fit the cultural context and in using reflective practice to continuously improve instructional strategies. Richards soon discovered that the rigid, notation-heavy methods of the Hungarian system were not ideally suited to American learners,

who often lacked the necessary background to engage fully with such a framework (Bennett, 1987). Confronted with these challenges, she re-evaluated her approach, recognizing that mistakes in her early methodology were valuable lessons that ultimately drove innovation. Her iterative process of reflection and adaptation allowed her to shift toward a more flexible, sound-based approach that emphasized both cultural relevance and student creativity. This commitment to learning from her missteps and evolving her practice remains a testament to her visionary contributions to music education.

By the mid-1960s, Richards acknowledged that beginning instruction with strict musical notation and closely adhering to Hungarian musical concepts was counterproductive in the diverse American context (Bennett, 1987). She observed that many American children struggled with such a structured approach, and her earlier teacher-directed methods often resulted in performances that, although enthusiastic, lacked musicality. This insight spurred a profound reevaluation of her teaching strategy, leading her to embrace a more sound-based method that prioritized the natural musicality of children and the intrinsic value of folk songs. In ETM, folk songs function as living texts: “The songs… have been handed down from generation to generation, changing according to the needs of those who are experiencing them” (Richards, 1978, p. 2). Richards’s determination to redesign the curriculum was coupled with a reflective mindset, as she continually assessed the outcomes of her revised strategies and refined her methods accordingly. Although this transition was fraught with challenges and met with resistance from educators accustomed to traditional models, her commitment to innovation and her ability to learn from each setback eventually prevailed. Her approach—grounded in reflective practice and a willingness to value mistakes as learning opportunities—resulted in the establishment of ETM as a distinct and culturally responsive pedagogical paradigm. Richards’s

legacy endures as a powerful example of how innovative teaching, grounded in continual reflection and adaptation, can transform music education.

Education Through Music

Education Through Music (ETM) is an innovative approach that transforms music education by moving away from traditional, rigid models and embracing a flexible, integrative perspective. Richards (1978) explains that "The experience of the song-experience-game—an art form—can affect children in such a way that they are better able to think, to invent, to discover, to respond and to communicate" (p. 3). This framework emphasizes experiential learning where children actively participate in singing, movement, and play, thereby developing both technical musical skills and a deep emotional connection to music (Richards, 1971; Suthers, 2004). ETM integrates cultural heritage into the curriculum to create a nurturing, inclusive environment that resonates with diverse learners, ensuring that musical content is both relevant and engaging (Richards, 1984). In Allsup's words: "Our students come funded by their previous experience. We are never blank slates." (Allsup, 2016, p. 47). Moreover, the approach values reflective practice by encouraging educators to continuously assess and refine their methods, viewing mistakes as vital opportunities for growth (Richards, 1978). Such a dynamic model has empowered teachers to adapt their practices to modern, culturally diverse classrooms, ultimately enhancing student engagement and creative expression. Empirical studies support this approach, demonstrating that integrated, play-based learning not only improves academic outcomes but also fosters holistic development across cognitive, social, emotional, and physical domains (Custodero et al., 2016). As ETM continues to evolve, its flexibility and commitment to continual improvement remain key to its success, ensuring that music education stays transformative and relevant for future generations.

At its core, ETM is underpinned by a robust theoretical framework that challenges conventional teacher-centered models and advocates for immersive, learner-centered methodologies. Drawing on educational theories such as constructivism and multiple intelligences, ETM positions music as an intrinsic language capable of organizing cognitive, emotional, and social experiences (Bennett, 1987). This philosophy argues that when students engage actively with music through play, movement, and collaborative exploration, they not only acquire technical proficiency but also develop critical life skills such as creativity, empathy, and resilience. The theoretical foundation of ETM stresses the importance of integrating students' cultural backgrounds into the learning process, thereby making the curriculum more authentic and meaningful (Richards, 1984). Reflective practice is another cornerstone of this philosophy, as it prompts educators to view each classroom experience as a learning opportunity that can refine instructional strategies over time. Contemporary research has validated the effectiveness of these approaches, showing that when educators embrace both successes and setbacks, they are better equipped to foster an inclusive and dynamic learning environment (Barrett, Flynn, & Welch, 2019). Ultimately, the comprehensive vision of ETM not only redefines how music is taught but also reshapes the broader educational landscape by promoting a holistic, culturally responsive, and student-centered model that inspires lifelong learning.

ETM Goals

The goals of ETM encapsulate a comprehensive and adaptable approach to music education that is designed to meet the diverse needs of learners across multiple dimensions. At the foundational level, ETM prioritizes the psychological and emotional comfort of individual learners, ensuring that classrooms provide supportive environments where students feel safe, valued, and free to take creative risks (Richards, 1971). This nurturing atmosphere is essential

for building trust, reducing anxiety, and laying groundwork for effective learning, all of which are critical for fostering both academic engagement and creative expression. By establishing such an environment, ETM creates the necessary conditions for students to fully participate in musical activities and begin to explore their own musical identities. In this way, the initial goal of ETM not only addresses immediate emotional needs but also sets the stage for more complex developmental objectives.

Building on this foundation, ETM promotes cooperation within groups by encouraging collaborative musical activities that enhance social skills and mutual respect among peers. As students engage in group singing, movement, and play, they learn the value of communication, teamwork, and shared responsibility. These collaborative experiences help to develop interpersonal skills and create a sense of community within the classroom, which is integral to a holistic educational model. Moreover, by working together on musical projects, students are exposed to diverse perspectives and learn to appreciate differences, thereby fostering an inclusive learning environment. This focus on social interaction reinforces the idea that music is not only a solitary pursuit but also a communal experience that brings people together.

As students progress, ETM shifts its focus to skills development through targeted activities such as ear training and vocal exploration. These activities empower learners to actively produce and interpret musical sounds while learning from their mistakes (Richards, 1971; Suthers, 2004). The structured yet flexible nature of ETM ensures that students gradually build technical proficiency while simultaneously cultivating creative problem-solving skills. Through activities like singing games, folk song performances, and sight-singing exercises, students deepen their understanding of musical patterns and literacy, enhancing their overall appreciation for musical structure and expression (Bennett, 1987). This stage of ETM

emphasizes the iterative process of learning, where mistakes are viewed as critical opportunities for growth rather than failures, further encouraging a resilient, reflective approach to music education.

At its highest level, ETM aims for a comprehensive mastery that integrates technical proficiency with artistic expression, preparing students for a lifelong journey of musical exploration and personal enrichment (Bennett, 1987; Richards, 1978; Richards, 1963). These goals are designed to be adaptable and inclusive, reflecting ETM's commitment to addressing the holistic development of the whole child. By structuring the curriculum at progressive levels, ETM ensures that each stage is reinforced by pedagogical strategies that emphasize reflective practice and the constructive use of errors as learning opportunities (Richards, 1971). Empirical studies, such as those by Hyde et al. (2009), validate that children benefit from a gradual increase in the complexity of their musical experiences while maintaining a supportive, play-based environment. For example, play-based singing games not only engage students but also promote social interaction and creative problem-solving (Barrett et al., 2019). This structured yet flexible framework allows educators to adapt the curriculum to meet the diverse needs of their students, effectively balancing rigorous technical training with creative and emotional growth. Ultimately, ETM Goals provide a comprehensive roadmap for achieving holistic educational outcomes, ensuring that music education remains both transformative and enduring throughout a student's life.

Building on the comprehensive framework of ETM Goals, educators have sought ways to further refine and implement these guiding principles in evolving contexts. The structured yet flexible approach of ETM, with its emphasis on holistic development, reflective practice, and cultural responsiveness, laid a solid foundation for subsequent innovations in music education

(Richards, 1978; Suthers, 2004). In response to emerging challenges and shifting educational climates, various groups of ETM practitioners have come together to reimagine and expand upon Mary Helen Richards' vision. One significant outcome of this evolution was the establishment of SongWorks, an organization that emerged from internal shifts within the ETM Trust and later evolved into Music Edventures Incorporated before adopting its current name (Bennett & Bartholomew, 1997). SongWorks embodies a renewed commitment to the philosophy of "Playful Teaching, Vibrant Learning" and seeks to integrate innovative, culturally sensitive pedagogical strategies into practical teaching (Bennett & Bartholomew, 1997; Bennett, 1987). By building on the foundational principles of ETM, SongWorks has rearticulated these goals to create a dynamic framework that continues to empower educators and enhance student engagement (Richards, 1978).

SongWorks

Grounded in its playful teaching, vibrant learning philosophy, SongWorks is dedicated to igniting curiosity and fostering deep engagement among learners (Bennett & Bartholomew, 1997). Central to this approach are well-crafted questions designed to stimulate critical thinking and enhance problem-solving skills, forming the bedrock of its innovative instructional design (Bennett & Bartholomew, 1997). Two of SongWorks' leading scholars, Dr. Peggy Bennett of Oberlin Conservatory of Music and Dr. Doug Bartholomew of Montana State University, synthesized SongWorks' principles and practices and combined them into two methods books, SongWorks I: Singing in the Education of Children (Bennett & Bartholomew, 1997) and SongWorks II: Singing from Sound to Symbol (Bennett & Bartholomew, 1998). SongWorks I, which supplied me with materials for my weekly sharing documents, captures the essence of singing in the education of children. Based on the premise that singing is the most natural and

effective way to teach music in childhood, this book is intended for pre-service and in-service teachers to create engaging, purposeful music experiences for children. The contents of the book, which provided my participants with pedagogical ideas for implementation in their classrooms, will appear in later sections when I describe what I shared with the group.

The SongWorks philosophy adopted thirteen guiding principles that provide educators with a flexible framework for making informed instructional decisions while still allowing individualized expression in diverse learning environments (Bennett, 1987). These principles empower educators rather than restrict them, enabling teachers to adapt their methods to meet the unique needs of their students and schools. For example, the principle of active engagement is realized when teachers design interactive singing and movement activities that require every student to participate, thereby deepening their connection to the music. Equally, the principle of nurturing emotional safety is applied when educators create classrooms where students feel secure enough to experiment with improvisation in singing games without fear of judgment.

Another guiding principle is the integration of cultural heritage, which encourages the inclusion of folk songs and traditional musical forms that reflect the diverse backgrounds of students, thereby validating their identities and enriching the curriculum (Bennett, 2022). Playful learning is also central, with teachers incorporating games and creative challenges—such as composing original lyrics or rhythms—to make lessons more engaging and memorable. Moreover, reflective teaching is emphasized; educators are encouraged to routinely assess their practices and view mistakes as valuable learning opportunities that drive continuous improvement (Richards, 1978). In addition, SongWorks promotes collaborative learning through group activities that build social skills and foster mutual respect among students. The framework also encourages creativity and innovation by allowing space for student input and ensuring

flexibility in instruction to adapt to unique classroom needs. Targeted auditory exercises are employed to emphasize listening skills, while interactive sight-singing and notation activities are used to develop music literacy. Finally, the integration of movement reinforces musical concepts and, along with all these elements, ultimately inspires a lifelong love of music through transformative experiences. Together, these guiding principles offer educators a comprehensive and adaptable roadmap for delivering innovative, culturally responsive, and engaging music education. A list of SongWork's principles is attached in Appendix C.

At the core of SongWorks pedagogy is a rich tradition of folk songs and singing games, which serve as foundational elements of its curriculum. This repertoire is carefully curated to maintain musical integrity while reflecting the diverse cultural backgrounds and interests of students (Bennett & Bartholomew, 1997). The selection process for these musical materials is guided by considerations of musicality and active student involvement, ensuring a dynamic and inclusive learning experience that resonates with learners. In addition to promoting musical skills, the integration of folk songs and singing games emphasizes movement and social interaction, which are essential for active engagement and collaborative learning, and in the case of my participants' classrooms, age and developmentally appropriate. Such practices nurture listening skills and lay the foundation for developing comprehensive music literacy and deeper musical understanding. Moreover, the incorporation of culturally relevant content not only validates students' experiences but also promotes a sense of belonging within the classroom. These elements collectively underscore SongWorks' commitment to making music education accessible and transformative.

Central to SongWorks' ethos is a commitment to responsive teaching practices that recognizes the varied ways in which children learn and express themselves through music. By

embracing this philosophy, SongWorks liberates educators to innovate and adapt their pedagogical approaches, thereby fostering a culture of creativity and continuous improvement in music education (Bennett & Bartholomew, 1997; Bennett, 1987). Liberating educators' creativity, in my opinion, is no less significant to fostering children's creativity. SongWorks has effectively delineated and sequenced the pedagogical practices advocated by Mary Helen Richards, whose influential ideas have been expanded upon in seminal publications tailored for educators (Bennett & Bartholomew, 1997; Bennett, 1987). These resources provide both practical guidance and robust theoretical underpinnings, serving as invaluable tools for educators seeking to integrate SongWorks principles into their teaching practices. Notably, SongWorks has extended its influence overseas, particularly in Japan, where its methodologies have been adapted for teaching English through song-based techniques (English EdVentures, Inc., n.d.; SongWorks Educators Association, n.d.). In Japan, educators employ SongWorks-inspired approaches to enhance pronunciation, vocabulary retention, and overall language fluency by leveraging the engaging, play-based nature of the model. This international adoption underscores the versatility of SongWorks, demonstrating that its core pedagogical ideas transcend cultural boundaries and can enrich educational practices in diverse contexts.

After studying the pedagogical approach of Mary Helen Richards and SongWorks, I attempted the method myself to see if I could also replicate a student-centered, constructivist classroom that I had observed while watching practitioners of SongWorks work their magic with their children. In my limited opportunities teaching post-COVID-19, I believe I managed to afford students opportunities to carry their prior learning and experiences into my new constructivist curriculum, where knowledge is synthesized through interfacing with new encounters (Azzarito & Ennis, 2003). For example, teaching a song called Circle Left to

preschoolers, instead of instructing the students what to do, I introduced the song by asking them to listen to the song "which will tell you what to do." The lyrics consisted of the phrase "Circle left, du-o du-o," which was repeated three times, and "Shake your fingers down" as the fourth and final phrase. The students moved to the lyrics as I sang the song a few times so that they could familiarize themselves with the tune. Then, I challenged them cognitively by asking questions such as "How many times did you hear the word 'left'?" and "What other directional words can we use instead of 'left'?" After they provided their answers, such as right, up, or down, we incorporated these new directional words that replaced the word 'left' into the song and sang the new lyrics together, before I asked students to use their bodies to physically demonstrate their suggestions so that we could choreograph the song together and turn it into a performance. Then, another challenge was added: after using the suggested movements the first two times through the song, the students were asked to create their own movements to complement the lyrics of the song on repeat. We ended the class with a student-oriented performance of the song Circle Left with adapted lyrics. I believe the SongWorks methods helped to manifest constructivism in action, which supports "greater student involvement in the process of learning by allowing students to construct or create new knowledge based on their own experiences" and "as a result, students accept greater responsibility for their own learning" (Goffi-Fynn, 2024, p.3). In August 2023, I had the privilege of sharing and playing this song with a group of music educators at the Asia-Pacific Symposium for Music Education Research in Seoul, South Korea.

While curricular materials may differ between regions, I believe that the enduring pedagogical ideas propagated by Mary Helen Richards and SongWorks continue to offer valuable insights worldwide. Educators in China, for example, stand to benefit from exploring

and incorporating SongWorks principles into their teaching methodologies, as these approaches prioritize student engagement and creativity—qualities that are universally valued in education. By embracing Richards's teachings and incorporating them into local contexts, Chinese educators can enrich their pedagogical repertoire and enhance the quality of music education for their students. This cross-cultural exchange of pedagogical knowledge highlights the universality of effective teaching practices and the potential for collaborative learning and innovation on a global scale. Ultimately, SongWorks exemplifies how theory and practice can be thoughtfully synthesized to empower educators and deliver transformative music education experiences across diverse educational settings.

Building on the transformative insights of SongWorks and the innovative pedagogical principles derived from Mary Helen Richards, the next step was to consider how to disseminate these ideas effectively among Chinese educators. Recognizing that change in teaching practice often flourishes in collaborative settings in China, I reflected on my own experiences and the well-established tradition of lesson preparation groups in China. These groups—known as 备课组 (bèi kè zǔ) or 教研组 (jiào yán zǔ)—serve as crucial platforms for educators to share curricular ideas and refine their instructional practices. With this in mind, I envisioned a teacher study group (TSG), which is similar to a lesson preparation group, as an ideal vehicle to introduce and explore the SongWorks approach. By leveraging the power of collective inquiry and professional collaboration, this group could foster a dynamic environment where innovative music education practices might take root and flourish. "The TSG format provides opportunities for teachers to actively learn together as they apply research-based concepts to classroom practice… in a setting that supports communication and collaboration" (Dimino & Taylor, 2009, p. 2). The following section outlines the formation of teacher study groups for professional

development and how these groups can support the integration of SongWorks principles among Chinese educators.

Lesson Preparation Group

I was excited about the possibility of sharing the innovative ideas of Mary Helen Richards and SongWorks with Chinese educators. I recognized that enriching teaching practices and fostering greater student engagement were possible through the integration of these approaches. Knowing what to share was the first step; finding an effective vehicle for delivery was the next. I recalled my childhood memories of sitting in my mother's office, where her cohort of English teachers would gather after school to prepare lessons and exchange curricular and pedagogical ideas. This memory inspired me to conceptualize a similar collaborative group focused on engaging with the pedagogical approach of SongWorks. I realized that such a lesson preparation group could serve as a powerful platform for professional development and collective inquiry. In essence, the idea of forming a collaborative group resonated with me as an ideal way to disseminate these innovative teaching practices.

In the Chinese educational context, collaborative groups like 备课组 (bèi kè zǔ) and 教研组 (jiào yán zǔ) already play a crucial role in fostering professional development. These groups provide structured platforms for teachers to exchange pedagogical insights, share best practices, and collectively address instructional challenges. Research in educational psychology, including studies by Vygotsky (1978), emphasizes that collaborative learning environments are essential for promoting teacher growth and efficacy. Through these groups, educators can leverage their collective expertise to develop innovative teaching strategies tailored to the diverse needs of their students (Johnson et al., 2014). Moreover, the collaborative nature of these groups aligns with the principles of cooperative learning, which underscore the benefits of collective problem-

solving and knowledge construction (Slavin, 1996). In addition, regular group meetings encourage reflective practices, enabling teachers to critically evaluate and refine their instructional approaches based on feedback and shared experiences (Schön, 1987). These collaborative dynamics ultimately create an environment where educators can continuously improve their teaching and enhance overall instructional quality.

A lesson preparation group also plays a pivotal role in promoting teacher research and professional inquiry within educational institutions. By engaging in regular meetings and discussions, educators can initiate collaborative inquiry projects to investigate pedagogical innovations, assess student learning outcomes, and evaluate the effectiveness of instructional interventions. Research on teacher collaboration underscores its positive impact on teacher morale, job satisfaction, and instructional effectiveness (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012). Furthermore, these groups foster a culture of inquiry and evidence-based practice, empowering educators to take ownership of their professional development and contribute meaningfully to the improvement of teaching and learning processes. In this way, lesson preparation groups serve not only as a vehicle for lesson planning but also as a forum for exploring and integrating innovative approaches like SongWorks. By sharing experiences and engaging in reflective practice, educators can better adapt SongWorks principles to their local contexts and enhance the quality of music education for their students. Thus, the establishment of such groups represents a promising strategy for bridging the gap between innovative pedagogical theory and practical classroom application.

Building on the success of lesson preparation groups, which foster collaboration and resource-sharing among teachers, I sought to explore alternative models that could further enhance professional development. Teacher Study Groups (TSGs) emerged as a promising

approach that emphasizes voluntary participation, reflective practice, and the integration of theory with practical classroom strategies. Unlike traditional groups that may be mandatory, TSGs encourage educators to take ownership of their learning journeys, fostering a community of inquiry and continuous improvement. The following section examines the concept of Teacher Study Groups in-depth, outlining how their dynamic, self-directed, and collaborative nature can support and extend the innovative pedagogical principles of SongWorks among Chinese educators.

5. Teacher Study Group

As I explored research methodologies and models similar to the Chinese lesson preparation group, I discovered the concept of Teacher Study Groups (TSGs) as a culturally relevant and effective professional development approach. According to Birchak et al. (1998), TSGs represent a dynamic framework designed to foster continuous, self-directed learning among educators. Central to the philosophy of TSGs is the principle of voluntary commitment, which is essential because it aligns with the belief that teachers must be proactive in their own professional development rather than participating merely out of obligation. When professional development becomes mandatory, it risks undermining the self-directed learning ethos that is fundamental to the success of these groups, potentially stifling authentic engagement and innovation. Voluntary participation ensures that educators are motivated by genuine interest, leading to richer discussions and a deeper commitment to refining teaching practices. This model also encourages teachers to take ownership of their learning process, which has been linked to improved instructional efficacy (Vescio et al., 2008). In this way, TSGs not only provide a platform for knowledge exchange but also empower educators to drive their own professional growth.

Teacher Study Groups also cultivate a strong sense of community among educators, which is essential for both emotional support and intellectual challenge. These groups serve as forums where teachers share experiences—both successes and setbacks—thus developing a supportive network that reinforces collective learning (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). The sharing of diverse perspectives and practical challenges helps to foster a culture of trust and mutual respect, which is critical for honest, reflective dialogue. Research in educational psychology, including Vygotsky's (1978) work on social learning, emphasizes that collaborative environments can significantly enhance teacher development by leveraging the collective expertise of group members. Structured dialogue within TSGs encourages critical reflection on teaching practices, ensuring that discussions are not merely anecdotal but also grounded in theoretical frameworks (Schön, 1987). This blend of reflective practice and practical application creates a dynamic equilibrium that drives continuous improvement in instructional methods. Consequently, TSGs are not just venues for lesson planning but also hubs for ongoing pedagogical inquiry and collaborative problem-solving. "Essential to the TSG PD program are the collaborative interactions and collective participation of its teacher participants" (Gersten et al., 2010, p. 7).

Moreover, integrating theory with practice is a cornerstone of the TSG model, ensuring that educators critically examine both the theoretical underpinnings and practical implications of innovative teaching strategies. Gersten et al. (2010) state, "Research suggests that PD works best when it attempts to integrate conceptual understanding with the pragmatic, procedural aspects of teaching practice" (p. 6). Studies by Garet et al. (2001) have demonstrated that when teachers actively engage in reflective inquiry, they are more likely to adapt and refine their methods in ways that improve student outcomes. In TSGs, teachers are encouraged to move beyond exchanging practical strategies; they also explore educational theories that explain why certain

approaches work, thereby enhancing the sustainability of these innovations (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012). This dual focus on theory and practice helps educators bridge the gap between research and classroom application, making professional development both intellectually stimulating and directly applicable to everyday teaching challenges. Additionally, such groups have been shown to boost teacher morale and job satisfaction, contributing to a more positive school climate (Stoll et al., 2006; Hattie, 2009). By fostering a culture of inquiry and evidence-based practice, TSGs empower teachers to become lifelong learners and change agents within their educational communities. These collaborative groups provide a powerful vehicle for integrating innovative pedagogical approaches—such as those promoted by SongWorks—into the fabric of everyday teaching, thus enhancing the overall quality of education. Having understood TSGs as a dynamic vehicle for fostering continuous, self-directed professional development among educators, the next step for me was to examine specific models that operationalize these principles in practice. The following models were selected because they not only embody the core principles of TSGs but also relate directly to the teaching of language and literacy—even though they target different populations and subject areas.

Teacher Study Group Models

As I explored various models of Teacher Study Groups (TSGs), the frameworks proposed by Gersten et al. (2010) and by Dimino and Taylor (2009) emerged as particularly influential for my own approach. Both models illustrate how collaborative professional development can be effectively integrated into educational practice, specifically in the context of language and literacy instruction. These models were selected for adaptation not only because they embody the core principles of TSGs but also because they have demonstrated positive impacts on teaching practices, albeit for different populations and subject areas. The work of Gersten et al. (2010)

offers empirical evidence through randomized field trials that examined the impact of TSGs on reading comprehension and vocabulary instruction for first graders. In contrast, Dimino and Taylor (2009) focus on enhancing vocabulary instruction through a structured, collaborative process among K–8 teachers. Together, these models provide a robust framework for understanding how TSGs can bridge the gap between research and classroom practice. Their findings support the notion that structured, reflective collaboration can lead to meaningful improvements in instructional quality and student outcomes.

Gersten et al. (2010). The TSG model proposed by Gersten et al. (2010) was grounded in a structured four-step recursive approach aimed at enhancing first-grade teachers' pedagogical skills and content knowledge, with the researchers serving as facilitators. As the authors frame its foundation, "The TSG PD program is grounded in the research on translating research into practice and on the promising best practices of PD that have emerged over the years" (Gersten et al., 2010, p. 6). The process began with a "Debrief Previous Application of the Research," during which educators shared their experiences implementing lessons from prior TSG sessions. This reflective phase allowed teachers to discuss what worked well, what did not, and how student responses informed their instructional practices. Next, the "Walk Through the Research" step involved a focused examination of key instructional concepts drawn from assigned readings, ensuring that teachers critically engage with and understand the underlying research. The third phase, "Walk Through the Lesson," brought the group together to collaboratively review an upcoming lesson, scrutinizing its strengths and limitations in the framework of research-based principles. Finally, the "Collaborative Planning" phase enabled teachers to apply their collective insights by designing a lesson that embodies the targeted research principles. This comprehensive model not only standardized the TSG sessions across different settings but also

allowed flexibility to address local challenges, thereby embedding research-based strategies into everyday classroom practice (Gersten & Woodward, 1990). “TSG sessions offer coherence by helping teachers make sense of the priorities… and providing opportunities for teachers to collaboratively plan lessons using those strategies” (Gersten et al., 2010, p. 8).

Dimino & Taylor (2009). Similar to Gersten et al. (2010), Dimino and Taylor (2009) offered a model that refined the process for improving vocabulary instruction. Their approach was structured around a five-phase recursive process that mirrored many elements of the Gersten et al. (2010) model while adding an “Assignment” phase to ensure the practical application of the collaboratively planned lesson. The process began with “Debrief,” equivalent to the reflective discussion of prior implementations, where educators shared successes and challenges. Next, the “Discuss the Focus Research Concept” phase deepened teachers’ understanding of specific instructional principles, akin to the “Walk Through the Research” step (Gersten et al., 2009). This was followed by “Compare Research with Practice,” which invited educators to critically assess the alignment between theoretical insights and their current teaching practices, like the “Walk Through the Lesson” phase. The subsequent “Plan Collaboratively” phase then enabled teachers to jointly design a lesson informed by their reflections and discussions. Finally, the “Assignment” phase tasked participants with implementing the collaboratively planned lesson before the next TSG session, ensuring accountability and continuous application of research-based strategies. This model has been shown to foster dynamic in-school learning groups that enhance instructional practices, particularly in the realm of vocabulary instruction (Dimino & Taylor, 2009). Overall, “A key component of the TSG model is for participants to help each other benefit from every session” (Dimino & Taylor, 2009, p. 2).

Together, the models proposed by Gersten et al. (2010) and Dimino and Taylor (2009) provide compelling evidence of the effectiveness of Teacher Study Groups in enhancing instructional quality. Although these models were originally applied to reading comprehension and vocabulary instruction, their underlying principles—structured reflective practice, collaborative inquiry, and the integration of research-based strategies—are widely applicable across subject areas. Their emphasis on both theory and practical application supports a continuous cycle of professional development that can be adapted to meet diverse educational needs. In the context of my research, these TSG models serve as a blueprint for developing a similar vehicle to introduce innovative pedagogical practices, such as those championed by SongWorks, into language and literacy instruction. This cross-disciplinary applicability underscores the versatility of TSGs and reinforces their potential to enrich teaching practices across different cultural and subject-specific contexts. Based on these insights, I designed my own model of a Teacher Study Group, which I will discuss in detail in the next chapter.

6. Summary

This chapter demonstrated that music and movement are essential to early childhood development by enhancing physical, cognitive, social-emotional, and linguistic growth, as evidenced by research from infancy through later developmental studies (DeCasper et al., 1994; Brown et al., 1981; Bengtsson et al., 2005). It highlighted the need for a pedagogical shift from traditional, rigid teaching models to flexible, child-centered approaches that integrate experiential learning and reflective practice, exemplified by Mary Helen Richards' Education Through Music (ETM) framework. ETM redefines music education by blending theoretical insights with practical application, thereby fostering creativity, resilience, and cultural relevance in learners (Richards, 1971; Suthers, 2004). Building on this foundation, SongWorks emerged

with its philosophy of "Playful Teaching, Vibrant Learning," extending these ideas globally and even being adapted in Japan to enhance language instruction (SongWorks Educators Association, n.d.). The chapter also examined collaborative professional development models, such as lesson preparation groups and Teacher Study Groups (TSGs), which provide structured, reflective forums that enable educators to share best practices and integrate research-based strategies into their teaching (Vescio et al., 2008; Schön, 1987). Detailed models from Gersten et al. (2010) and Dimino and Taylor (2009) illustrate how systematic debriefing, research discussion, and collaborative planning can enhance instructional quality, particularly in language and literacy instruction. These insights form a robust conceptual framework that has informed the design of my own TSG model, which will be discussed in detail in the next chapter.

Chapter 3: How We Did the Work

Introduction

Chapter 3 outlines my methodological approach used to investigate how early childhood educators in Deyang, China, integrated music and movement into their English language teaching practices. Through collaborative action research conducted during a 12-week teacher study group, my research sought to investigate: 1. How do early childhood educators transition from using music and movement primarily for engagement to embedding these creative elements as structured, pedagogically driven strategies? 2. In what ways can music function as a multidimensional pedagogical tool to foster young children's holistic development? 3. How do educators leverage a collaborative teacher study group, grounded in reflective practice and action research, to continually refine and innovate their instructional methods?

Guided by the principles of qualitative research, this chapter first provides the rationale behind selecting its methodologies, highlighting the suitability of the case study and teacher study group models for addressing these research questions. Following this move, the chapter introduces the participants, offering profiles that illustrate their professional backgrounds, personal teaching philosophies, and the educational context within which they operate. Next, the chapter describes the setting, emphasizing both the broader cultural and economic characteristics of Deyang and the specific context of the English learning center that served as the research site. Then, I detail what I learned from my pilot study, and I share insights and information about my role as the facilitator of the teacher study group. I conclude with descriptions of the data collection methods, data analysis techniques, and ethical considerations, laying the groundwork for Chapter 4, where the narrative accounts of the teacher study group's experiences are presented.

The Necessity of Qualitative Research

A qualitative research methodology underpins this study's exploration of how Chinese educators creatively integrate music and movement to enhance their teaching, functioning as an umbrella concept. For this study, a qualitative approach is instrumental in capturing teachers' nuanced, subjective experiences as they navigate the complexities of pedagogical innovation within their particular cultural and institutional contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2016). The broad category of "qualitative research" was chosen for its strength in providing deep insights into human behaviors, thoughts, and interactions, making it ideal for examining the multifaceted ways educators utilize music and movement (Roulston, 2006). Through methods such as interviews, reflections, participant observations, video and document analysis, the study looked to uncover educators' knowledge construction, pedagogical strategies, the rationale behind these choices, and their perceived impact on student engagement. This layered analysis facilitates an understanding of the practices themselves while also providing a window into the broader educational narratives that shape and are shaped by these practices (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Ultimately, qualitative research allows for exploration that goes beyond numerical data, giving voice to the lived experiences of educators and offering insights that can inform more effective and contextually sensitive teaching practices.

Qualitative research's emphasis on context and the relativity of meaning makes it particularly well-suited to studying educational practices. It enabled me to dive into the 'how' and 'why' questions that quantitative methods might overlook, offering insights into the pedagogical reasoning behind the use of music and movement (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). This methodology can be employed to reveal the specific interactions between innovative teaching methods and the everyday realities of the classroom. Furthermore, its flexible and responsive

design allowed responses to emerging findings and unanticipated challenges. This adaptability is essential for understanding the evolution of teaching strategies and how my participants refined their approaches based on direct classroom experiences. In this way, qualitative research provides a holistic picture that informs practical improvements in teaching practices tailored to the study's unique context.

Case Study

The case study method is utilized as a distinct and critical layer of the qualitative research design, enabling an exploration of the teacher study group as a unique instance of collaborative professional development focused on integrating music and movement into teaching. This methodological choice allows for a concentrated examination of a bounded system or case within its real-life context, providing an understanding of the phenomenon under study (Yin, 2018). The case study approach is particularly suited to this research as it offers the flexibility to investigate the complex, contextual, and multifaceted nature of the teacher study group, the "case," including the interactions, pedagogical discussions, challenges, and successes encountered by educators. By employing a variety of data collection tools and engaging in a detailed analysis of the teacher study group's operations, the case study method facilitates an understanding of the processes through which music and movement are integrated into teaching practices. It also examines the impact of these practices on fostering an environment conducive to creativity, capturing the nuances of collaborative learning and professional growth within the specific context of Chinese education.

Building upon the attributes of the case study method previously mentioned, my study further leveraged its strength to assist in revealing the dynamics of change and development within the teacher study group. The longitudinal nature of case study research allows for

observing the evolution of teaching practices and professional relationships over time (Baxter & Jack, 2008), offering insights into the sustained impact of integrating music and movement into pedagogy. This dimension enables the documentation of the iterative pedagogical investigation, experimentation and reflection processes that characterize the teacher study group's collaborative work, as we see in the next chapter. Through extended observation and analysis, the research intended to afford an opportunity to capture the gradual shifts in educators' attitudes, the progressive integration of innovative strategies, and the cumulative effects of pedagogical creativity. The case study method, with its capacity for in-depth exploration, is thus pivotal in understanding the immediate outcomes and the long-term implications of creative pedagogical interventions within the educational landscape (Stake, 1995). By employing diverse data collection tools such as interviews, observations, and artifact analysis over periods of time, this approach potentially ensures a dynamic portrayal of how music and movement can be woven into the fabric of teaching and learning, elucidating the transformative potential of these practices in enhancing educational experiences.

Teacher Study Group

As mentioned in my previous chapter, the teacher study group concept and practice constitute a pivotal research layer in my study, so much so that the objectives of the teacher study group have been integrated into my conceptual framework. This dynamic setting provided a space for Chinese English language educators to explore integrating music and movement into their teaching, offering a vibrant community of practice where exchanging ideas, experiences, and pedagogical strategies was actively encouraged and facilitated (Wenger, 1998; Hord, 1997). This research layer focuses on the collaborative nature of the teacher study group, investigating how it fosters an environment of mutual learning, innovation, and support among its members.

Within the teacher study group, *educators are not merely passive recipients of professional development; they are active participants engaged in a process of shared inquiry and reflective practice*. Moreover, the group serves as a microcosm of broader professional learning communities, harnessing collective insights to enhance instructional practices. Ultimately, the teacher study group provides a fertile ground for examining how collaborative engagement translates into tangible improvements in teaching methodologies (Vescio et al., 2008).

My study examined the mechanisms through which the teacher study group method facilitated mutual support, collective inquiry, and the continuous exploration of teaching strategies. By analyzing the interactions, discussions, and reflective practices occurring within the group, this layer was able to shed light on how collaborative learning environments foster both innovation and pedagogical advancement. The teacher study group's emphasis on shared experiences and peer feedback played a crucial role in enabling educators to navigate the challenges of integrating music and movement into their teaching. In addition, the dynamics within the teacher study group revealed how teachers looked to overcome obstacles by drawing on collective expertise and practical insights. The teacher study group, in which I acted as the facilitator, highlighted the potential of professional learning communities to act as catalysts for educational innovation. This underscores the significance of collaboration and community in driving continuous professional growth (Lieberman & Mace, 2010). A discussion of the teacher study group design will be presented in a later section to contextualize its development and implementation further.

Teacher Action Research

Embedding teacher action research within the teacher study group introduces a layer of practitioner-led inquiry, enabling educators to systematically explore and refine their integration

of music and movement into teaching. This layer emphasizes the cyclical process of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting, which affords teachers opportunities to conduct informed experiments within their classrooms (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2014). By engaging in action research, *educators become researchers in their own practice*, investigating how their new strategies impact student learning and engagement. This participatory approach helps to foster a deeper understanding of effective teaching practices by prompting critical reflection and iterative improvement. It aims to cultivate a sense of agency among teachers, encouraging them to take ownership of their professional development and the evolution of their instructional methods (Imants & Van der Wal, 2020). Ultimately, teacher action research seeks to transform educators into active agents of change in their classrooms (Bradley-Levine et al., 2009).

The integration of action research within our teacher study group context contributed to the collaborative and reflective nature of the group's learning process. As teachers in this study undertook individual or collective action research projects, they brought their findings, challenges, and questions back to the group for discussion and reflection. They brought their feelings and beliefs, too. Looking ahead, we will see that Ivy embraced the iterative nature of reflective practice to systematically integrate music and movement in her classroom. Her efforts, for instance, led her to design new instructional activities that progressively shifted from using music as a mere engagement tool to incorporating it as a core, pedagogically driven strategy. Similarly, Rachel's journey was marked by her proactive experimentation with action research; she introduced creative modifications in her lesson planning process every week and leveraged the group's collective insights to refine her teaching methods. Finally, the reflective discussions within the group not only affirmed a third participant's commitment to recalibrating her

classroom approaches through peer feedback and continuous self-assessment but also underscored the overall potential of collaborative inquiry in transforming educational practices.

This iterative sharing of experiences and insights enriched collective knowledge and provided a supportive framework for navigating the complexities of pedagogical innovation (Elliott, 1993). Moreover, teacher action research underscores the dynamic relationship between theory and practice as everyday educators apply pedagogical concepts in practical settings and reflect on their applicability and impact. Through teacher action research, the teacher study group can become a vibrant space for professional learning, demystified, where continuous inquiry leads to gradual improvements in teaching and learning. In this way, the integration of teacher action research reinforces the collaborative ethos of the teacher study group.

Overall, the teacher action research layer became a key component in operationalizing the teacher study group's goals of enhancing teaching by creatively integrating music and movement. It is a laboratory site, where teachers can experiment. Teacher action research provided a structured yet flexible framework that allowed my participants to examine the practical implications of novel teaching strategies. This approach contributes to both individual and collective development by prompting teachers to reflect on their practices. They made adjustments based on classroom and peer feedback. Such insights offer, though not definitively, evidence that can inform broader educational practices and policies. By carefully documenting and analyzing the processes and outcomes of teacher action research within the teacher study group, my research study aimed to highlight the potential of teacher-led inquiry as a model for continuous professional growth and incremental innovation in education, even if its profound and particular achievements are hard to document.

Participants

Three early childhood teachers from an out-of-school English learning center in Deyang, Sichuan, were purposefully selected for this study for their experience and proficiency in teaching various early childhood age groups. Their years of teaching across different proficiency levels allowed them to accumulate significant educational experience. Each teacher had previously participated in a pilot study of mine, exploring new teaching practices that exposed them to more creative teaching practices, setting the stage for contributing insights regarding the integration of music and movement into language instruction. The following profiles, using pseudonyms, reveal their distinct personal characteristics and professional abilities by emphasizing their willingness to investigate and apply fresh teaching methods in our teacher study group's supportive atmosphere. Their portraitures contain information I collected from our pre-study chats.

Ivy

The first time I met Ivy was at her out-of-school English learning center in Deyang, Sichuan. She greeted me warmly at the door, immediately setting a comfortable tone for our interactions. Ivy introduced herself as the school's Principal. She struck me as youthful and approachable, dressed casually yet professionally in a neatly pressed white blouse paired with jeans and sneakers. Her relaxed yet confident appearance, accentuated by her stylish glasses and easygoing smile, reflected a balanced personality, embodying both authority and approachability. Standing before me, Ivy conveyed a distinct sense of warmth, her expressive eyes suggesting genuine enthusiasm and curiosity about the research we were about to embark upon. Her demeanor suggested an educator who was equally comfortable leading a classroom or facilitating a group of peers.

With six years of teaching experience, Ivy spoke passionately about her philosophy of "learning through play" during her pre-study interview, explaining her belief in playful interactions as critical for fostering children's development and joy in learning. "I particularly like the learning through play theory, as it does a great job balancing both the individual development of children and the element of fun!" Unlike many Chinese teachers I had encountered in similar settings, Ivy openly welcomed spontaneous student expression, describing behaviors others might label as so-called "disruptive," rather than opportunities for authentic learning experiences. This perspective was consistent with her broader teaching style, one marked by clearly articulated instructional goals accompanied by carefully individualized activities to accommodate each student's developmental needs. Though relatively petite, Ivy's expressive eyes and lively gestures conveyed contagious enthusiasm when she described how music and playful approaches could energize and focus her classes. As our conversation progressed, her open and reflective speaking style made clear her genuine willingness to explore new pedagogical methods despite the practical challenge of managing large classes.

Of course, Ivy's dual role as both a principal and classroom teacher shaped her view of professional development, and she recounted her previous experiences in teacher study groups as formative opportunities that profoundly influenced her current practices. She candidly shared her concerns about managing large groups of students, noting that the diversity of abilities made individualized instruction particularly challenging. Ivy also openly discussed how she had used music informally for classroom management and to regulate student emotions but now aspired to integrate musical activities more purposefully into her language lessons. Throughout the interview, she maintained a thoughtful balance between professional seriousness and an easygoing manner, occasionally punctuating her reflections with laughter that underscored her

approachable and collaborative personality. Ivy was particularly animated when sharing her excitement about engaging in collaborative lesson planning, clearly relishing the chance to exchange ideas and experiences with colleagues.

Ivy's style in group contexts further revealed her versatility. She mentioned comfortably adopting multiple roles—leader, contributor, and attentive listener—suggesting suitability for the collaborative nature of our teacher study group. Despite her enthusiasm, she expressed realistic concerns about potential challenges, such as the adaptability of new instructional strategies and the difficulty of using music and singing, particularly with older students. Nevertheless, her firm commitment to participating throughout the study and openness to different forms of communication reinforced my confidence in her dedication and professionalism. Recalling our initial meeting, I was struck by how Ivy's thoughtful preparation and evident passion for education matched her approachable personality and practical mindset. As we will see in the next chapter, her sincere desire to enhance the creative climate of her teaching practices and her ability to candidly reflect on their strengths and challenges made her an invaluable member of our study group.

Nancy

Nancy's inviting personality left a lasting impression on me during our initial meeting at the Deyang English school. Her radiant smile and genuine enthusiasm welcomed me, making me feel instantly comfortable. The dynamic energy of Nancy's character shone through her curly hair while her friendly nature radiated positivity throughout the room. Her lively and warm demeanor became evident during our first conversation as she effortlessly engaged with those around her. Her vivid personality was particularly apparent when she candidly shared her teaching experiences, including both her successes and current challenges. Nancy came into the

study group with eight years of teaching experience. Despite never having participated in teacher study groups or similar structured professional development, she approached this new opportunity with remarkable openness and enthusiasm. In her pre-study interview, she revealed a consistent practice of weekly reflection, emphasizing her self-assessment approach based on immediate student feedback and classroom observations. Nancy expressed particular interest in refining strategies to better integrate students who struggle with attention or understanding during lessons, demonstrating her commitment to inclusive teaching practices.

Nancy highlighted her comfort and eagerness for collaborative approaches, rating herself as “very comfortable” in engaging in joint lesson planning and open dialogue with colleagues. Yet, she expressed a slight concern about clearly communicating her ideas within a group setting, worried that misunderstandings might hinder effective implementation by fellow teachers, to which I reassured her that she did not need to worry. Despite having no previous experience with formal teacher study groups, Nancy conveyed enthusiasm about the potential to learn new knowledge and skills. Specifically, she hoped this experience would inspire fresh approaches for each new group of students she encountered, enabling her to maintain dynamic and innovative teaching practices rather than repetitive, routine instruction.

Regarding music integration, Nancy recounted using songs occasionally in her classes to establish quotidian routines, manage behavior, and maintain student engagement, but she expressed a desire to expand these practices more systematically and creatively. She was especially interested in discovering methods to naturally facilitate language acquisition through music, providing not just academic growth but also emotional well-being. Recognizing the broader implications of the study group, Nancy emphasized her aspiration to gain insights into international educational practices, particularly methodologies that could enhance language

teaching. She envisioned this participation as a critical steppingstone toward overcoming teaching plateaus, broadening her educational perspective, and contributing meaningfully to her professional growth. Throughout our conversation, her optimism and proactive attitude suggested that she would be instrumental in fostering a collaborative and reflective learning community within the study group, which proved to be the case.

Rachel

Among the three participant educators in the study group, Rachel emerged as the most seasoned member, with twelve years of teaching experience spanning various age levels, from early childhood to advanced classes. My initial encounter with her, when she was part of a group of teachers, did not make a strong impression until our later meeting, when at a Sichuan hotpot dinner, she revealed her warm and friendly nature. In a room filled with tantalizing scents of simmering spices, Rachel opened up and shared her stories with me, telling me about her young son and her motherhood experiences, including reading English stories to him. I noticed Rachel's composed self-assurance and thoughtful attention during our conversation, which displayed her professional background as an experienced teacher and lead teacher trainer at the center. Her frequent smiles and attentive listening showed curiosity and openness to what I shared and our exchange on teaching, setting a welcoming tone for our subsequent collaborative sessions.

During her pre-study interview, Rachel described her teaching style as "inquiry-based, contextualized, and task-driven," emphasizing her commitment to creating meaningful learning experiences matching real-world scenarios. She acknowledged that one of her key challenges was finding the right balance between instructional efficiency and engaging, enjoyable classroom activities, particularly given class size and duration constraints. Rachel confessed that music was not her area of strength; she detailed her current practice of using songs primarily as classroom

warm-up or transition activities for younger students and as listening exercises through lyric gap-fills for older learners. Asking if she was ready to incorporate more music and movement activities, I sensed a level of hesitancy sprinkled with anticipation. Rachel's reflective nature was evident in her disciplined weekly self-assessment, as she habitually reviewed each lesson immediately after teaching, carefully evaluating whether she met her objectives and adjusting future lessons accordingly. She also described implementing differentiated instruction as she showcased a great understanding of her students, systematically addressing the varied cognitive abilities in her classrooms. Rachel indicated high comfort levels with collaborative teaching and group discussion, noting her usual roles as an active contributor and an attentive listener in group environments. She was optimistic about group collaboration, expressing confidence that diverse teaching styles within the group would lead to richer educational outcomes.

Like other teachers, Rachel firmly committed to attending all teacher study group meetings. In fact, all three teachers attended *every* session of the 12-week teacher study group. In addition, she expressed a strong preference for face-to-face and video meetings, believing direct interactions fostered deeper, more productive dialogues that are valuable when combined with activities. From a long-term perspective, Rachel viewed participation in the study group as an exciting venture into a new teaching domain. She particularly hoped the group's activities would provide her with practical methods and fresh inspiration for her current pedagogy. Rachel also requested resources for music and singing, believing these would support her adoption of music-based methods. Although mindful of possible personal and curricular challenges, she maintained a cautiously optimistic outlook, focusing more on the potential rewards of creative experimentation than on anticipated obstacles. Rachel's thoughtful reflections, experienced

insights, and out-of-the-box thinking made her a valuable member of our study group, deeply enriching our collective exploration of innovative, music-based teaching methodologies.

Setting

The prefecture-level city of Deyang lies 60 kilometers northeast of Chengdu in Sichuan Province, where the prominent Chengdu Research Base of Giant Panda Breeding is located. Deyang holds tier-four status but is a leader in heavy equipment manufacturing with a strong reputation in the industrial sector. Major industrial players like China National Erzhong Group and Dongfang Electric Corporation make Deyang the foundation of China's heavy machinery market. Deyang's economic prosperity through its industrial dominance influences its urban landscape, which displays lively streets alongside modern buildings. My visits revealed strong local pride in the industrial successes that residents passionately discussed during conversations about current developments and their larger effects. The industrial achievements of Deyang go hand in hand with its deep historical roots and cultural heritage, which is represented by the world-famous Sanxingdui Archaeological Site. The site dates back approximately 3,000 to 5,000 years, and its mysterious bronze masks and ancient artifacts demonstrate the advanced civilization that existed in this area. Local arts like Mianzhu New Year paintings illustrate the city's cultural depth as these works encapsulate four great folk art traditions of China. The Deyang Confucius Temple stands as one of Western China's most intact historical structures, while local Three Kingdoms period sites demonstrate the city's extensive cultural heritage. Ancient heritage elements woven into contemporary life create a significant appeal that sets the city apart.

Deyang's environment also contributes significantly to its charm and livability. Strolling along the Jinghu lakeside, I was drawn to the slow-paced rhythm of life—distinctively calmer

and less hurried compared to the provincial capital of Chengdu. This relaxed atmosphere extends to daily life, with friendly street vendors, aromatic Sichuan hotpot restaurants bustling with families and friends, and lively street markets. With countless hotpot places, Deyang is well-known for this featured meal that showcases bold tastes and shared dining practices that embody Deyang's warm hospitality and deep-rooted culinary customs. Due to its geographical location and expanding integration with Chengdu, Deyang has witnessed growing demands for new educational opportunities. Out-of-school educational programs that adopt modern teaching methods attract families who intend to see their thrive in Deyang before sending them to Chengdu for greater opportunities. All three participating teachers are local citizens who have a native understanding of the city's education environment.

English Learning Center

This research study was situated within an English learning center widely recognized as one of the largest and most reputable institutions of its kind in Deyang. The center began its operations in 2009 as part of an established national franchise which receives recognition throughout China for its specialized English language teaching services outside of school for early childhood to junior high school students. The center has played a pivotal role in building English language proficiency across the community by welcoming thousands of students through its doors over the years. During my visits, I saw dynamic classrooms where enthusiastic students and committed staff members worked together to create a supportive learning environment. The facility's design featured cheerful classrooms with bright colors, each equipped with tables and chairs, which even the youngest students are expected to sit in, and high-technology interactive whiteboards.

The center has excelled in its achievements. Yet its leaders openly acknowledged an area that required substantial development. Through discussions with Ivy, who leads the center as Principal, I gained insight into how the teachers at the center had a strong English foundation and professional commitment, but their education was received in smaller city colleges where educational standards were not as high as those in urban areas. This context resulted in some limitations regarding teachers' exposure to innovative teaching methodologies and their comfort level with employing creative, student-centered instructional techniques. Ivy identified this deficiency and committed to improving professional development by introducing more interactive and music-based teaching activities to her staff's instructional methods. This is why she invited me to visit to work with the teachers. By openly recognizing areas for growth, Ivy offered a reflective mindset that inspired her teaching staff and prepared our teacher study group for productive exploration.

Pilot Study

While visiting the English learning center in Deyang, I initially introduced the concept of integrating songs and playful activities into English language instruction. I also engaged informally with a few teachers, played games, and modeled song-based activities with a group of early childhood students. The teachers noticed the children's enthusiastic reactions to the playful learning exercises, which instantly sparked their curiosity and interest. Then, Ivy, the Principal, asked me to run a professional development workshop for her teachers because she witnessed the positive effects of music activities on student engagement. The professional development session allowed me to introduce educators to the SongWorks pedagogical approach (Bennett & Bartholomew, 1997) by showing how music-based activities could effectively change classroom interactions and teach languages through structured, playful activities.

Following this professional development session, teachers enthusiastically experimented with the song game methodology in their classrooms, actively sharing their experiences and providing detailed feedback. While some teachers found immediate success engaging their students through musical activities, others expressed concerns about mastering songs or managing classroom discipline while integrating music. Specifically, teachers noted the challenge of effectively using musical methods without losing focus on language instruction goals, and older students sometimes appeared reluctant to participate fully in singing activities due to self-consciousness or lack of familiarity. The feedback revealed critical insights into the practical realities of integrating music and play into instruction and highlighted the need for ongoing support and deeper, sustained exploration of these pedagogical principles. Encouragingly, a group of teachers consisting of the center's most experienced educators, including Ivy, Nancy, and Rachel, approached me afterward with genuine enthusiasm, requesting additional resources and expressing their strong interest in continuing to explore and refine their implementation of the song game approach.

The reaction from teachers made it clear that establishing a teacher study group would offer educators the best way to engage collaboratively and reflectively with creative pedagogical principles in greater depth. Through the study group model, educators will receive time and space to learn, examine, and reflect upon teaching strategies before adapting them to their unique classroom situations. In structured yet flexible collaborative sessions, teachers could work together to solve problems, share adaptations, and gain confidence in implementing song and game-based methods. Through structured yet open-ended collaborative sessions, the teachers could collectively address challenges, share innovative adaptations, and build confidence in their abilities to effectively integrate song and game-based methods. This participatory and reflective

approach aimed to facilitate deeper understanding, improved pedagogical decision-making, and a sustained commitment to innovative instructional practices. Ultimately, the pilot study laid the foundation for a longer-term exploration of creative teaching methods, resulting in the creation of the teacher study group intended for this dissertation.

Role of the Researcher

In this online study, I acted primarily as the facilitator of the teacher study group, guiding participants through structured yet flexible collaborative sessions. My role involved providing carefully selected pedagogical resources from the SongWorks methodology (Bennett & Bartholomew, 1997), posing reflective questions, and facilitating group discussions. For example, I used specific SongWorks techniques—such as secret songs and inner hearing—to help teachers add more "mystery" and nice, exciting elements into their classrooms. These techniques complemented the educators' exploration of how music and movement could be transformed into a dynamic teaching tool, fostering creative lesson design and implementation. As outlined in the next chapter, these SongWorks strategies became the thresholds upon which teachers reimagined their pedagogical practices—serving as a catalyst for innovative, contextually appropriate, and engaging classroom experiences that continuously evolved through reflective inquiry and collaborative experimentation.

While I did not directly conduct research in their classrooms myself, working online, I supported the teachers as they undertook their own action research, encouraging them to critically reflect upon and adapt creative teaching strategies to their specific contexts. The absence of face-to-face interaction and the difficulty of reading nonverbal cues occasionally made it challenging to build rapport and gauge the teachers' real-time reactions. In addition, technical issues, such as participants occasionally forgetting to mute their microphones, led to

background chatter and interruptions, which disrupted the flow of conversation and sometimes made it harder to focus on the discussion. By maintaining detailed observational notes and responding thoughtfully to participants' feedback, I hoped that the sessions remained responsive to teachers' needs and relevant to their classroom realities. Ultimately, my primary responsibility was to create and sustain an environment or framework, affording a space conducive to reflective practice, collaborative inquiry, and professional growth.

Teacher Study Group Design

As mentioned, my dissertation adopted a teacher study group model to match the participants' existing knowledge of lesson preparation groups in China, hoping for cultural relevance and appropriateness. I implemented an adapted teacher study group approach based on the models created by Gersten et al. (2010) and Dimino and Taylor (2009), whose models expanded upon foundational professional development research conducted by Gersten and Woodward (1990), Gersten et al. (1991), Gersten et al. (1995), Gersten and Brengelman (1996). As thoroughly discussed in Chapter 2, the model proposed by Gersten et al. (2010) initially included four recursive stages: 1. Debrief Previous Application of Research, 2. Walk Through the Research, 3. Walk Through the Lesson, and 4. Collaborative Planning. Also presented in Chapter 2, Dimino and Taylor (2009) structured their professional development program similarly with the following stages: 1. Debrief, 2. Discuss the Focus Research Concept, 3. Compare Research with Practice, and 4. Plan Collaboratively; they also added a fifth stage called Assignment. Modeling after those two programs, my study initially intended to follow a similar five-phase process after also considering other professional development research. The iterative cycle used in this study was intentionally remodeled because I believe it allows for broader and flexible continuous reflection and adaptation, which is especially important in a culturally appropriate

context such as China, where collaboration and sustained dialogue are highly valued. By using this structured yet flexible framework, my participants had repeated opportunities to refine their teaching strategies based on peer feedback and evolving classroom realities so that professional growth could remain both responsive and contextually relevant.

My initial teacher study group design consisted of 1. Debrief and Reflection, followed by 2. Introducing New Ideas, 3. Discussing New Ideas, 4. Collaborative Lesson Planning, and 5. Assignment. Prior to each week's session, the participants agreed to send their teaching videos from the previous week, as well as written documents called the Lesson Planning Form (Appendix A) and the Personal Reflection Journal Form (Appendix B), which are related to the videos, into our online WeChat group chat (except for weeks one and two). All four of us would review the materials before meeting online over Tencent Meeting, similar to Zoom, the next Tuesday. Then, during the first step, Debrief and Reflection, the participants would provide accounts of their experiences implementing planned lessons from the previous session, discussing successes and challenges. As the teacher study group coordinator, I facilitated the conversations and asked questions, when needed, to promote the exchange. This phase provided a reflective space where teachers critically examined their instructional strategies together.

My initial step two, Introducing New Ideas, consisted of my selection of topics and concepts related to music and movement, usually obtained from SongWorks I, and the creation of weekly reading materials for the participants to read during the sessions. However, after the first two sessions, this step of the teacher study group was moved offline to save time for synchronous online reflection and discussion. From week three onward, I sent the weekly reading materials to our WeChat group, usually right after our previous session. By sharing the documents with the teachers ahead of time, they had more time to digest the pedagogical ideas

than engaging with them during our online sessions. The weekly topics that were shared included Singing and Children's Development, Approaches to Teaching Songs, Choosing and Introducing Songs, Re-introducing Songs, Part Singing, Movement, Chinning, Inner Hearing, Antiphonning, Ideographs, Rearranging Ideographs, and Teaching with Creativity (see table below). Each of those will be expanded upon in the next chapter.

Table 1. List of Weekly Topics

Week	**Topic**
1	Singing and Children's Development
2	Approaches to Teaching Songs
3	Choosing and Introducing Songs
4	Re-introducing Songs
5	Part Singing
6	Movement
7	Chinning
8	Inner Hearing
9	Antiphonning
10	Ideographs
11	Rearranging Ideographs
12	Teaching with Creativity

In the proposed third step, Discussing New Ideas, participants would collectively review the reading materials and evaluate how these concepts could be incorporated into their lessons. The focus was on generating constructive dialogue that allowed for free exchange of ideas while ensuring alignment with the research- and practice-based strategies. This phase was intended to be a critical bridge between theoretical concepts and practical application. While it was designed as a standalone step, in reality, steps three, Discussing New Ideas, and four, Collaborative Lesson Planning, were combined into one step, in which the teachers discussed the concepts and their implementations together. The goal was that by the end of each session, the participants would have their individual actionable instructional plans that they took away, knowing what they would implement in their classrooms during that week. However, while the teachers had no issues engaging in conversations about the pedagogical ideas, their attempts at designing lesson plans together usually resulted in incomplete tasks, which they had to finish on their own after the session. Yet from their Lesson Planning Form (Appendix A), I could see our group discussions bearing fruit, as teachers hatched out their plans individually after the group sessions.

The fifth step of the iterative process was Assignment. The teachers were asked to return to their classrooms to implement the designed lessons with the understanding that they would later share their experiences, challenges, and successes with the group. Given cultural and personal sensitivities regarding formal peer observation, teachers agreed to record their teaching sessions instead of being directly observed. These recordings provided data for subsequent review and reflection, thus reinforcing the iterative nature of the research design. The inclusion of the Assignment phase served not only as a practical step for implementing new strategies but also as a mechanism for sustaining the cycle of reflective professional development. Because I took step two, Introducing New Ideas, offline and combined steps three and four, the teacher

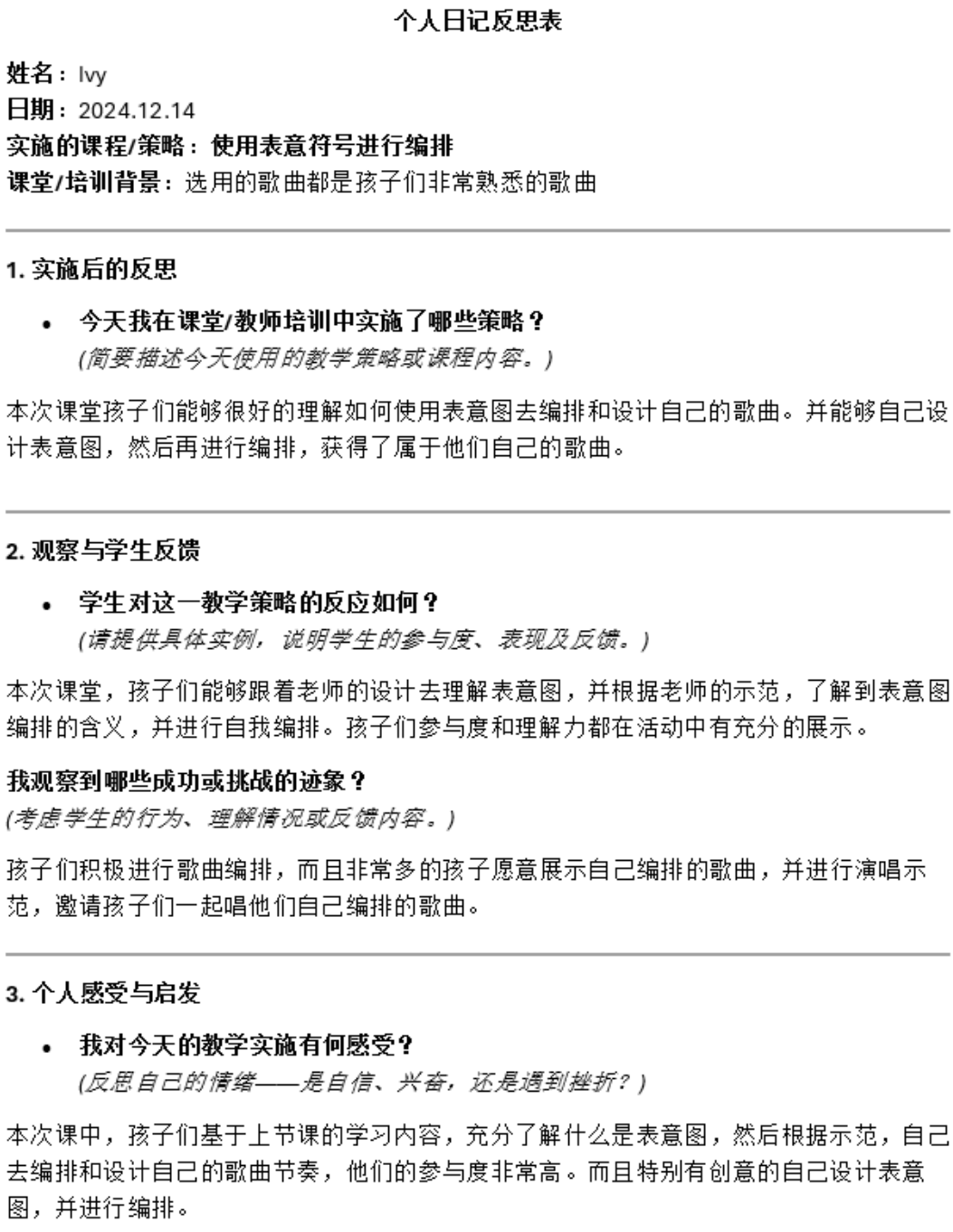
study group ultimately involved three steps during each online session; the new steps became Debrief and Reflection, Discussion and Implementation, and Assignment. In the end, the teacher study group research consisted of 12 weekly sessions, each lasting approximately one hour. While shorter than my anticipated duration of 75 to 90 minutes, as Dimino and Taylor (2009) proposed in their model, I am grateful that the teachers were able to set aside time each week to keep their commitments.

Data Collection

The data collection approach employed within this qualitative case study involved multiple methods to ensure nuanced insights into the teachers' experiences, classroom practices, and pedagogical transformations. Data collection occurred primarily within the context of the 12-week teacher study group sessions, leveraging several complementary sources of evidence. First, participants engaged in collaborative and individual planning; they reported their implementation plan on a detailed Lesson Planning form (Appendix A) designed to guide the application of new teaching strategies systematically. This document allowed teachers to articulate their instructional objectives, describe new pedagogical strategies, outline their implementation plans, anticipate classroom challenges, and specify necessary resources for each lesson.

The participants sent their weekly planning to the online WeChat group chat, usually before our discussions the following week, sharing them with the group for collective reflection and peer feedback, thus promoting continuous refinement and shared understanding of the strategies. To complement their planning process, the teachers completed a Personal Reflection Journal form (Appendix B) after each lesson implementation, which was also submitted to WeChat prior to the following week's session (see screenshot of the original form in Chinese below).

Figure 2. Example of Personal Reflection Journal



个人日记反思表

姓名： Ivy
日期： 2024.12.14
实施的课程/策略：使用表意符号进行编排
课堂/培训背景： 选用的歌曲都是孩子们非常熟悉的歌曲

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1. 实施后的反思

- **今天我在课堂/教师培训中实施了哪些策略？**
  (简要描述今天使用的教学策略或课程内容。)

本次课堂孩子们能够很好的理解如何使用表意图去编排和设计自己的歌曲。并能够自己设计表意图，然后再进行编排，获得了属于他们自己的歌曲。

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2. 观察与学生反馈

- **学生对这一教学策略的反应如何？**
  (请提供具体实例，说明学生的参与度、表现及反馈。)

本次课堂，孩子们能够跟着老师的设计去理解表意图，并根据老师的示范，了解到表意图编排的含义，并进行自我编排。孩子们参与度和理解力都在活动中有充分的展示。

我观察到哪些成功或挑战的迹象？
(考虑学生的行为、理解情况或反馈内容。)

孩子们积极进行歌曲编排，而且非常多的孩子愿意展示自己编排的歌曲，并进行演唱示范，邀请孩子们一起唱他们自己编排的歌曲。

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3. 个人感受与启发

- **我对今天的教学实施有何感受？**
  (反思自己的情绪——是自信、兴奋，还是遇到挫折？)

本次课中，孩子们基于上节课的学习内容，充分了解什么是表意图，然后根据示范，自己去编排和设计自己的歌曲节奏，他们的参与度非常高。而且特别有创意的自己设计表意图，并进行编排。

These journals encouraged systematic reflection on several key aspects of their teaching experiences, including their observations of student reactions, emotional responses, insights

gained during the lesson, and perceived appropriateness and effectiveness of the implemented strategies. Teachers reflected on what worked well, what was challenging, and what required improvements, identifying specific modifications for future lessons. These journals prompted teachers to reflect and connect individual teaching episodes to their broader professional goals and long-term pedagogical vision, thus capturing personal growth alongside practical classroom insights. Additionally, teachers recorded their classroom implementations through video recordings, providing qualitative data for group analysis and individual reflection. These recordings allowed the participants—and myself as a facilitator—to revisit actual classroom dynamics and performances, examining teachers' classroom delivery and student interactions. My personal observation notes also complemented these recordings, intending to capture as much detail as possible to contribute to our weekly group sessions. These notes helped triangulate the data (Donkoh & Mensah, 2023) and facilitate group discussions.

The pre-study interview conducted individually with each teacher before the study offered foundational data regarding their instructional philosophies, pedagogical practices, prior experience with music integration, and their expectations and concerns related to the teacher study group. Insights from these interviews helped establish baseline conditions and informed the ongoing discussions and adaptations of the collaborative sessions. Additionally, I maintained observational notes and personal reflections throughout each session, capturing both explicit discussions and implicit group dynamics, hoping to provide a deeper context for understanding how teachers evolved in their use of creative pedagogy. Collectively, the data collection methods formed a plan that captured teachers' concrete implementation experiences alongside their individual and collective reflective processes, emotional trajectories, and professional growth. The study produced a plethora of qualitative data by integrating structured planning documents,

reflective journals, classroom recordings, pre-study interviews, and session transcriptions, enhancing our understanding of how collaborative action research effectively supports pedagogical innovation and creativity in early childhood language instruction.

Data Analysis

The myriad data collected throughout this study underwent a systematic and iterative process of analysis aimed at revealing meaningful patterns, themes, and insights. Given the diverse sources of evidence, I employed thematic analysis to deepen my understanding of the dynamics of teachers' reflective practices, collaboration, and the integration of creative pedagogical principles into teaching (Braun & Clarke, 2006). According to Fereday and Muir-Cochrane (2006), thematic analysis is "a search for themes that emerge as being important to the description of the phenomenon" (p. 82). In addition, all video-recorded sessions and interviews were transcribed verbatim, enabling me to code significant phrases, ideas, and observations systematically. Through multiple rounds of reading and coding, emergent patterns and themes were identified, categorizing key insights into the teachers' classroom practices, collaborative processes, and professional growth. This structured approach provided a nuanced examination of rich qualitative data.

I employed triangulation throughout the analysis to ensure trustworthiness and deepen the understanding of teachers' experiences. By cross-referencing multiple data sources—including video recordings of teaching, personal reflections from participant journals, transcripts of group sessions, and my observational notes—I verified findings and ensured they represented participants' perspectives. Triangulation allowed me to evaluate consistencies and discrepancies among different data sources, enhancing the credibility and reliability of the analysis (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). For instance, teachers' self-reported reflections were compared with video-

recorded classroom interactions and peer feedback during group discussions, leading to more accurate interpretations of their pedagogical transformations. Triangulating these multiple perspectives enriched my understanding of how the study group fostered meaningful shifts in teacher practices and beliefs.

Thematic analysis also played a significant role in interpreting qualitative data, helping to identify overarching patterns that described how teachers evolved in their use of music and movement as instructional tools. I systematically organized the qualitative data into themes reflecting the central research questions, recall: *1. How do early childhood educators transition from using music and movement primarily for engagement to embedding these creative elements as structured, pedagogically driven strategies? 2. In what ways can music function as a multidimensional pedagogical tool to foster young children's holistic development? 3. How do educators leverage a collaborative teacher study group, grounded in reflective practice and action research, to refine and innovate their instructional methods continually?* Critical incidents, self-directed professional actions that help teachers develop a sense of personal responsibility for their teaching (Little, 1995) and known to the participants as "aha" moments, were also identified through the thematic analysis, marking significant turning points or breakthroughs in teachers' pedagogical journeys. By examining these pivotal moments closely, the analysis illuminated how particular experiences—such as Rachel's surprise at student engagement with musical activities or Ivy's realization of music's profound pedagogical potential—catalyzed significant shifts in understanding and practice (Shapira-Lishchinsky, 2011). The identification and detailed examination of critical incidents allowed me to explore how specific classroom experiences and group interactions shaped teachers' instructional methods and beliefs throughout the study.

Ethics

In preparing and conducting this research study, I prioritized ethical considerations throughout all phases, beginning with trying to clearly communicate the study's objectives and procedures to the participants. Following recommendations by MacDonald (2012), I sought explicit permission from relevant authorities and maintained continuous communication with the leadership team at the English learning center to ensure alignment with their institutional goals and priorities. Before initiating the study, I held ongoing discussions with Ivy, Rachel, and Nancy, openly outlining the research objectives, potential outcomes, and their rights as active collaborators, including their freedom to withdraw at any time. These conversations not only adhered to ethical standards but also ensured participants understood and accepted the study's principles and procedures. The ethical responsibility extended to acknowledging my positionality as the facilitator, openly recognizing my own biases, interests, and previous experiences with music education and language teaching. Such transparency was essential to building trust and setting clear expectations for the collaborative work ahead.

Within the 12 weeks of the teacher study group, transparency remained a central ethical principle guiding my interactions with the teachers. During our weekly sessions, I regularly reinforced open communication, ensuring teachers were comfortable voicing concerns, challenges, and suggestions openly. All recorded materials—audio, video, and written reflections—were shared only within the group and handled with utmost confidentiality. Ethical responsibility also involved carefully storing digital and printed documents, ensuring data security and privacy. I consistently encouraged shared ownership of the research process, asking teachers to shape the direction and content of our sessions collaboratively. By maintaining

openness and mutual respect, I sought to ensure that all participants had equitable access to information generated by the study, creating a genuinely cooperative research environment.

Throughout the study, I remained attentive to the delicate balance between my facilitative role and the participants' autonomy, consistently affirming their agency as active contributors to the action research process. While serving as a guide and resource provider, I actively minimized hierarchical dynamics by encouraging collaborative decision-making and collective inquiry. I transparently acknowledged the limitations and biases inherent in my background as a music educator, remaining reflective and open about how these might influence my facilitation and interpretations. Furthermore, I consciously structured the group sessions to maximize the involvement of all participants, ensuring each teacher's voice was heard, respected, and valued. By cultivating an inclusive and ethically responsive environment, the research process naturally fostered the teachers' professional growth, reflective practice, and mutual support. Ultimately, these ethical commitments ensured that the study upheld the highest professional integrity standards while benefiting all participants involved.

Summary

Chapter 3 has discussed the methodological framework underpinning this qualitative study, explaining how the design and implementation of a teacher study group aimed to explore and support the integration of creative teaching practices among early childhood educators in Deyang, Sichuan. By presenting the procedure, participants, setting, data collection, and analysis methods, I have outlined my approach to investigating how collaborative action research and reflective practice can enhance creative pedagogical innovation. Having outlined the methodological considerations and established a rationale for the teacher study group's design, the next chapter will present narrative accounts and detailed descriptions of the group's actual

activities and discussions. Drawing on extensive qualitative data, Chapter 4 will illustrate how each participant's teaching practices and beliefs manifested throughout the teacher study group experience, providing narratives of the challenges, successes, and critical incidents encountered along the way.

Chapter 4: Inside the Teacher Study Group

Introduction

In this chapter, I present a chronological narrative of the teacher study group's week-by-week sessions, highlighting both the theoretical and practical dimensions of our collective work in integrating music and movement into early childhood language instruction. The sessions were arranged in a linear sequence, showing how each meeting built upon the last and describing the teachers' evolving pedagogical choices, classroom experiences, and reflections. By illustrating our group discussions, lesson planning, and the teachers' post-session insights, this chapter provides a detailed look into how the educators explored music-based strategies, adapted them for their particular classes, and assessed their impact on student engagement and learning. Ultimately, these accounts attempted to demonstrate how the interplay between research-informed ideas, reflective practice, and experimentation created a robust professional learning community focused on holistic, child-centered teaching.

It is worth noting that many of these methods—especially those rooted in movement, creative expression, and conversational practice—were fairly novel within the broader context of language instruction in China, where classrooms often emphasize rote memorization, reading comprehension, and teacher-centered activities. For a North American audience accustomed to a variety of constructivist-based pedagogies, these early steps might appear fundamental. However, for the participants in this study, even beginning-level implementation of music and movement was an experimental departure from standard practice. The teachers encountered struggles such as reconciling creative activities with tight curriculum expectations, overcoming insecurities about their own musical abilities, and adapting strategies to students' varying comfort levels. These challenges highlighted the transformative potential of bridging cultural and

pedagogical differences: by venturing into more interactive, child-centered, and expressive teaching methods, the group demonstrated how educators, through reflective collaboration, could reshape traditional frameworks to better serve their learners.

Session One

Session One: Introducing New ideas

In Session One, because the teachers had no assignment to implement new pedagogical ideas in their classrooms last week, we forewent the first step of the teacher study group, Debrief and Reflection, and began with the second step, Discussing New Ideas. For this week, I shared a weekly reading document titled Singing and Children's Development. In this document, I introduced the teachers to the concept of singing as a transformative activity in children's holistic development, highlighting its profound potential beyond simple vocal expression. The reading material emphasized that singing engages children's emotions, language skills, and motor coordination simultaneously, making it an exceptionally comprehensive learning activity. I shared how singing can evoke deep emotional responses, strengthening connections between students and helping build trust, community, and social interaction within the classroom. Furthermore, I stressed the importance of recognizing and embracing the natural continuum of vocal ability, reassuring teachers that every child, regardless of perceived talent, can benefit significantly from participating in singing activities. The material also underscored the relationship between singing and language acquisition, pointing out that songs can significantly enrich vocabulary development, enhance storytelling abilities, and foster an appreciation of poetic elements in language. Additionally, I highlighted the importance of situating singing within an educational context, so it serves not just as entertainment but as a catalyst for meaningful cognitive and social growth. I encouraged teachers to embed singing regularly into

their daily teaching practices, emphasizing that doing so would significantly enhance children's ability to express themselves, actively participate in their learning community, and experience well-rounded development.

Session One: Discussing New Ideas

After spending 10 minutes reading the document I shared, the teachers began to discuss and explore how the newly introduced music-based pedagogical strategies related to their classrooms. Ivy opened the conversation by vividly describing how the weekly reading material sparked her imagination. She explained that after reading about the deep emotional and social power of singing, she began to see her classroom as a living canvas where every rhythmic melody could serve as a lesson in active listening. “I then extended my thinking to how I can apply the teaching method in my classroom,” she recalled, her eyes lighting up as she described how even a familiar word like “table” could be broken down into its syllabic beats, turning language into a series of natural rhythms. She illustrated her point by recalling a moment when a teacher’s demonstration of a song helped students feel the meaning of a sentence through melody and movement, where the children clapped along to the beat, and their faces showing concentration and delight as they absorbed the music and language simultaneously. Her narrative invited her colleagues to envision classrooms where every note and move contributed to a deeper understanding of language.

Nancy drew parallels between the experience of singing and the process of learning to read. She observed thoughtfully, “Reflecting on how we learn through music in our classrooms, I wondered if there is a similar process when we teach reading.” Nancy recalled how, during a reading lesson, children naturally form an overall impression of a story by listening intently to its recitation. In her recounting, she described the children sitting in a circle, eyes fixed on her as

they absorbed the flow of the narrative like a stream of music. Nancy emphasized that this holistic exposure creates a foundation upon which more detailed discussions can later be built, to which I commented, “It is a constructivist process.” I then introduced the concept of constructivism to the teachers, explaining how this theory supports the idea that students build their understanding by integrating new experiences with their existing knowledge, much like assembling a mosaic from individual musical notes. I further pointed out that this same constructivist process also applies to our teacher study group. In our group, each discussion and reflective practice serves as an opportunity for teachers to collaboratively build their professional knowledge; this dynamic, evolving process reinforces that learning is active and co-constructed, making our teacher study group a vibrant community of inquiry and shared growth.

Rachel then contributed by sharing practical, real-life examples from her own classroom, illustrating how the themes in the reading material come to life. She remembered a specific instance when she played the recording of a familiar tune in class, and the room transformed into an interactive playground of sound and movement. Rachel described the joyful scene: children tapped their feet, raised their hands eagerly, and even improvised gestures to match the melody, all of which brought the song’s emotional depth into focus. She noted that the reading material’s discussion of the social power of singing resonated with her experience, where the act of singing and playing together created an atmosphere of unity. Rachel also shared how a quiet student suddenly joined in, encouraged by the collective energy, and how that moment became a turning point for the entire class.

Session One: Collaborative Lesson Planning and Assignment

This week, the teacher study group session did not include collaborative lesson planning in the traditional sense because I deliberately refrained from sharing specific new pedagogical

ideas to try in the classroom—a deviation from the subsequent weeks. Instead of prompting group discussions around detailed lesson designs, our focus was on reflective dialogue centered on the theoretical foundations introduced in the weekly reading materials. Without concrete research- or practice-based ideas to build a lesson around, the teachers did not engage in the kind of joint planning we would see later in the study group. This intentional decision was meant to allow the teachers to ease into the teacher study group and settle in with a reflective mindset. However, we did agree that the participants would consciously incorporate elements of music and movement into their lessons over the coming week. I encouraged the teachers to take a mindful approach, deliberately experimenting with how musical activities could complement their existing instructional methods while allowing for creative adaptations that best suited their curricular needs and interests. In addition, I requested that they record their observations and reflections on the impact of these new strategies—documenting any challenges, successes, or unexpected outcomes—which they would then bring back to our group the following week for collaborative reflections. My goal was to create a cycle of action and reflection, where the experiences from the assignment would serve as the basis for our next group session's discussions.

Session Two

Session Two: Debrief and Reflection

This week we began with Debrief and Reflection. Ivy reflected extensively on her teaching practice by detailing how she integrated poetry with musical elements to create an engaging learning experience. She began her lesson by playing the entire poetry piece with its accompanying music, believing that the musical background was well aligned with the course theme and essential for setting a sensory stage that evoked the imagery of spring and the gentle

flow of a waterfall. By asking guiding questions like “how do you feel” and “what do you know about this poem,” she encouraged the students to immerse themselves in the overall atmosphere of the lesson before diving into its intricacies. Once the students had absorbed the sensory experience, she transitioned into exploring the details of the poem, focusing on its rhythmic and phonetic elements, with an emphasis on recognizing repeated sound endings or similar starting letters. This approach led the children to identify and mimic these patterns, sparking creative responses with examples like “a boy a toy” and “fox in the box,” which demonstrated their understanding and active participation. Ivy noted that nearly every student engaged in this creative exercise, an improvement compared to previous lessons where participation was lower. She was also impressed by the children’s ability to invent their own rhymes—both surprising and encouraging.

Nancy explained that she did not incorporate any music or movement into her lesson this week, which surprised me. She admitted, “I didn’t use the song in my class last week, so there’s nothing to show yet,” as she grappled with a new unit focused on more abstract content. As she mentioned that unlike the previous unit where animal habits were easy to demonstrate through lively examples and use songs to sing about them, this unit introduced concepts like “crazy” in contexts such as a “crazy cafe,” where everything—from the hat to the plate—was unusually eccentric. Vivian described the moment when she recalled the “crazy cafe” lesson, saying, “Everything was crazy; the hat was odd, and even the tree was crazy.” She confessed that she felt confused about how to convey this idea, since the children had never experienced something so outlandish in their daily lives, leaving her uncertain about how to interpret the article’s imaginative language. The article, intended to reinforce the pronunciation of the letter C and to introduce related vocabulary like “crazy cup,” left her questioning how to pose questions that

would capture its playful spirit without sounding too rigid. In her reflective tone, she mused over whether integrating music could help bridge the gap between the abstract content and her students' understanding, even though she had not yet found a way to incorporate such elements into the lesson.

I then introduced the song "Down by the Bay" to the group, using it as a springboard to explore the playful intersections of language, music, and imagination. I sang a part of the song for the group: "Did you ever see a goose kissing a moose? Did you ever see a llama eating his pajamas? Did you ever see a bear combing his hair? Did you ever see a whale with a polka dot tail?" I tried to bring enthusiasm and curiosity as I suggested that these absurd "images" might offer rich material for integrating language, English, and music in creative ways. I shared with the group that interacting with children often reveals a remarkable contrast between adult frameworks and the boundless, sometimes wild, creativity of young minds. I noted that our own imaginative limits, shaped by our experiences as adults, might constrain us, while children see "crazy" ideas in a completely different light. To encourage our educators to try incorporating music and songs, I proposed that we think of other songs related to the themes they taught and offered to find them together. While Rachel also failed to make an attempt using music and movement for her lesson, she contributed to the discussion and added that, "I feel that, we shouldn't try to explain every line for reading comprehension because once you explain it, you lose the spark of imagination—when I see this song, I immediately feel that it's impossible to explain it to the children." The reflective dialogue from our Debrief and Reflection segment underscored the varied experiences and challenges or failures each teacher faced in integrating music into their classroom practices. I then steered the conversation toward exploring new creative possibilities by introducing the pedagogical ideas I prepared for this week.

Session Two: Introducing New Ideas

Week Two's reading material delved into various strategies for teaching songs, urging educators to examine their own musical backgrounds through a "music-maker inventory" that challenged the assumption that only formally trained musicians can lead effective singing activities. The text contrasted two principal teaching approaches: the whole-song approach and the part (or echo) approach. In the whole-song approach, students learn songs by hearing them in their entirety, which can help to preserve the natural flow and meaning of the music while allowing them to internalize its structure as a complete piece. Conversely, the part approach involves breaking down a song into smaller segments and using echoing techniques to correct specific elements, though this method may sometimes disrupt the overall cohesiveness of the song. The material emphasized that active listening is crucial as it enables both teachers and students to engage deeply with the music by comprehending, evaluating, and recalling its components. It also suggested that while echoing can be useful for addressing challenging passages, the ultimate goal is to help students experience and appreciate the song as a whole (Bennett & Bartholow, 1997). The strategies discussed this week sought to encourage educators to balance precise skill development with the preservation of musical integrity, thereby fostering a richer, more engaging learning environment.

Session Two: Discussing New Ideas

In discussing new ideas, Ivy led the group through her vision of blending whole and part approaches in teaching. She described a sequence where, whether learning a text or a song, students first build a familiar listening foundation—so much so that if they like it, they begin to sing along unconsciously, resonating with the rhythm and lyrics. "You have that natural familiarity through listening, and the lyrics start to echo within you," she explained, painting a

picture of a classroom alive with intuitive musical engagement. She then elaborated that the process should not stop at passive absorption; after the whole piece is experienced, it is essential to break it down—using gestures, tone, and body language to emphasize specific parts. Her description recalled the structure of "The King's New Clothes," where the story is first understood in full, then dissected into key elements like the needs of the emperor or the trajectory of the tailors, and finally reassembled into a dynamic performance. The idea was to create an environment where the act of listening evolves into active participation, a transition from mere background noise to a focused, analytical, and expressive activity. Her explanation encouraged the group to consider how, through strategic use of music, they could nurture not only the students' retention of lyrics but also their ability to engage with language on a deeper, more creative level.

Continuing the discussion, Rachel proposed that using music as a medium could serve as a bridge for learning complex content. She recalled that in some lessons, after playing a song, children would naturally extract and recreate phrases on their own, reinforcing their understanding without the teacher needing to explain every detail. "It's like letting the music speak for itself; once the children love the tune, they're ready to explore its meaning independently," she said, her tone animated with the possibility of this approach. She suggested that the same principle could be applied when teaching new texts, where students first listen to an entire narrative to capture its emotional flow and then, through guided questioning, break down the text into manageable, meaningful segments. She argued that this method would support active listening, where children are not just hearing words but analyzing, categorizing, and even mimicking the language in ways that mirror their natural creativity. Nancy added that this active listening process is crucial, as it transforms learning from a passive act into a constructive

experience where knowledge is built step by step. Following their discussion, I asked the teachers to think about how to incorporate what they had read and shared into their experimental lesson this week.

Session Two: Collaborative Lesson Planning and Assignment

In the final five minutes of our session, we shifted to the Collaborative Lesson Planning segment. However, due to the lengthy but necessary discussions in the earlier parts, this phase was significantly shortened to fit within our 60-minute window. The group's energy and contributions had already set a high level of engagement, yet time constraints prevented us from crafting detailed lesson plans for each teacher. Instead, each teacher agreed to think about how to incorporate the ideas discussed into their lessons on their own. Towards the end of the session, we all acknowledged that even without a concrete plan today, the discussion had seeded promising ideas that could later be developed. We agreed that the responsibility to experiment with these concepts in our classrooms would fall on each teacher, with plans to reconvene with their insights next week. Hoping to make great use of each session, I suggested moving the Introducing New Ideas section to an offline format by sharing reading materials to our WeChat group chat prior to each session, which would save time during our meetings. The teachers all agreed to this proposal, and as the session drew to a close, we said farewell.

Post-Session Weekly Sharing

For the next session, Session Three's reading material, titled "Choosing and Introducing Songs," focused on the critical process of selecting valuable songs and effectively introducing them to children. It emphasized that teachers do not need to be virtuosos with instruments; rather, their own singing and enthusiasm are key to engaging students. The text outlined criteria for choosing songs that are easy to sing, enjoyable, and capable of providing a rich array of musical

experiences, including movement, language play, and active listening. It also suggested that songs should resonate with children's interests and cultural backgrounds to make the learning process more meaningful. Additionally, strategies for introducing a new song were presented, such as exploring the lyrics' meanings and connecting them to students' personal experiences, which aids in both comprehension and retention. The material also provided a practical four-step process for starting songs—focusing, pitch, gesture, and listen—illustrating how to guide students to join in a song smoothly. Overall, the reading encouraged educators to balance technical precision with creativity, ensuring that the process of choosing and introducing songs can become an inspiring and integral part of the classroom experience.

Session Three

Session Three: Debrief and Reflection

The teacher study group resumed after taking a two-week break. The pause was unanticipated, as the teachers had to handle an unexpected situation at the school, leaving us no time to reschedule that week. The following week coincided with China's Golden Week vacation, providing citizens with a full week off in early October. As we began the Debrief and Reflection session after the hiatus, the teachers struggled to recall details of their teaching from two weeks ago. Ivy only remembered that she implemented a song to strengthen students' understanding of directional vocabulary while helping them practice prepositions and spatial concepts. She noted that students followed the lyrics by moving in specific directions but encountered a challenge, that the students became so enthusiastic during the game that they forgot to pay attention to what the lyrics meant. Rachel said she demonstrated how using call-and-response methods helped students concentrate on song lyrics; Nancy aimed to build students' language skills through pre-teaching essential song vocabulary, which would help them better

understand both the song's melody and lyrics. I asked if they could screen share videos of their lessons so everyone could gather details, but unfortunately, my earlier request for the weekly teaching videos was not fulfilled. Additionally, my request for their recorded observations and reflections on their implementation of new pedagogical ideas also appeared to be incomplete.

Instead of spending time rehashing previous lessons, I asked the group to think of ways to better reflect on their teaching. Ivy said, “We could create a standardized reflection form that guides teachers to record both the successes and challenges of each lesson,” ensuring that key details are captured consistently. Rachel proposed using brief audio recordings immediately after class to document their thoughts quickly while the experience was fresh. Responding to these ideas, I suggested creating a reflection form for them to journal their thoughts, allowing them to answer the guiding questions either in writing or verbally on WeChat. The teachers agreed, and we brainstormed questions to be included in what I later termed the Personal Reflection Journal Form (Appendix B). This form is designed to encourage systematic reflection on key aspects of their teaching experiences, including observations of student reactions, emotional responses, insights gained, and assessments of the implemented strategies. In addition, I inquired if another form to assist with individual lesson planning might be useful; the teachers supported this idea, and we discussed the contents of what I later called the Lesson Planning Form (Appendix A). Before moving on to Discussing New Ideas, I requested that the teachers record their teaching sessions and send the videos to our WeChat group chat before each subsequent session, with the hope that no further sessions would be compromised. The teachers agreed to this, and they ultimately submitted videos each week for the next nine weeks, as well as both of their forms.

Session Three: Discussing New Ideas

Building on the reading materials I shared offline, the group analyzed this week's document on the thoughtful selection and effective introduction of songs, using their recent classroom experiences as a lens. Ivy began by discussing how her earlier practice of choosing songs solely based on children's preferences had evolved. "During my earlier choices, I selected music solely based on children's preferences, but I now understand that the challenges presented by lyrics, rhythm patterns, and repetition are crucial factors," she explained, her tone conveying both insight and enthusiasm. She painted a vivid picture of the process: students first build familiarity with a song by simply listening and naturally beginning to sing along, allowing the melody and rhythm to become part of their shared experience. Then, as the teacher gradually breaks the song down using gestures, tone, and body language, students are invited to engage more deeply by matching these cues to the song's structure. Ivy's description evoked the image of a classroom where learning is both an auditory and kinesthetic adventure, urging us to consider not just the song itself, but how its introduction can create a foundation for active, engaged learning.

Continuing the discussion, Rachel proposed that music could serve as a bridge for understanding complex content. "It's like letting the music speak for itself; once the children love the tune, they're ready to explore its meaning independently," she observed, reflecting on moments when students naturally extracted and recreated phrases after hearing a new song. The group then dissected a four-step process outlined in the reading—focus, pitch, gesture, and listen—as a practical framework for introducing songs. Teachers discussed the importance of guiding students with clear verbal signals such as "Eyes here!" or "Ready!" to initiate active listening. Nancy emphasized that for younger learners, establishing these cues is essential to build a consistent reference, which in turn may bolster their ability to perform confidently. "The

pitch is essential. Our teaching strategy should also test how well students understand the material. The listening element requires children to concentrate fully on what's asked to determine what they should listen for." Furthermore, the educators recognized that providing a stable starting pitch is important. However, Rachel seemed worried. "What if I can't provide a pitch reference or it's unstable each time?" asked Rachel. The rest of us encouraged her to try her best and see how it went before moving to our next stage.

Session Three: Collaborative Lesson Planning and Assignment

In the final segment of our session, the teachers explored some possibilities for integrating the ideas discussed earlier into their upcoming lessons, with respect to the weekly curricula they were supposed to teach. Although some suggestions were raised, such as Rachel's proposal that warm-up activities could incorporate learning a catchy nursery rhyme with dynamic body language, the teachers did not settle on any concrete individual plans, as we found that the remaining time available was insufficient for detailed collaborative planning. Rather than forcing an immediate resolution, we acknowledged that the flexibility of individual planning after the session could accommodate the teachers' needs better. Also, for future sessions, we decided to combine the "Discussing New Ideas" and "Collaborative Lesson Planning" segments to create a more fluid rather than sequential process that would allow us to seamlessly transition from brainstorming to planning without the pressure of running out of time. This integrated approach aimed to maintain the spontaneity and creativity of our discussions while ensuring that each teacher has ample opportunity to reflect on and develop their own lesson strategies. As we concluded the session, the teachers expressed their hope for this new structure, noting that it would provide a more sustainable framework for enhancing future conversations.

Post-Session Weekly Sharing

For next week, Session Four's reading material built on last week's broader theme of Choosing and Introducing Songs by focusing on reintroducing familiar songs in creative ways. The text explained that once a song has been initially introduced and learned, it is beneficial to revisit it through extended activities that help reinforce its words, rhythms, and melody. Teachers are encouraged to draw on students' collective knowledge by asking recall questions, letting them teach parts of the song, and even using secret song presentations as a playful puzzle. This secret song strategy involves providing clues progressively through non-notation, non-conventional notation, or conventional notation presentations, which helps maintain the integrity of the musical experience while deepening understanding. The material emphasized that reintroducing songs not only aids in reinforcing memory but also invites students to engage actively and collaboratively. It highlighted that this approach, when integrated with thoughtful questioning and student-led sharing, transforms the act of singing into a dynamic learning process. Overall, by reintroducing familiar songs, educators can enhance students' musical competence and enjoyment while aligning with the core principles of choosing and introducing songs effectively.

Session Four

Pre-Session Individual Submissions

Prior to Session Four, all three teachers submitted their Lesson Planning Form and Personal Reflection Journal Form. For this and subsequent Pre-Session Individual Submissions sections, I will summarize what the teachers recorded in their Lesson Planning Form first, then disclose what they shared in the Personal Reflection Journal Form. For her Week Three lesson, Ivy aimed to introduce her class to map reading by using a song centered around directions. Her initial plan involved playing a directional song to capture students' attention and spark their

interest in directional language. Ivy intended to demonstrate clear gestures corresponding with directional words in the song, hoping that students would observe closely and respond correctly with their own actions. During the class, she planned to reinforce the directions with phrases such as “eyes on Ivy, listen to me, turn left, move left,” clearly connecting verbal instructions with physical gestures. In her post-lesson reflection, Ivy noticed that most children engaged eagerly, observing her movements attentively and following the musical cues accurately. She felt satisfied that the children grasped the game's rules quickly, providing precise and enthusiastic physical responses during the musical activity. Nonetheless, Ivy realized that not all children participated enthusiastically—some seemed disinterested. This realization prompted her to consider adjustments for future lessons. She concluded by expressing the need to enhance the game's appeal, possibly by selecting more engaging music or adjusting the duration, thus ensuring more children might participate with more enthusiasm.

Nancy prepared her lesson around scientific concepts of position, motion, and direction. Nancy intended to use a direction-themed song called “Directions” to facilitate students’ understanding of cardinal points. She planned an initial inquiry, motivating the students to actively listen to the song and extract directional information. Nancy also aimed for students to perform corresponding body movements in synchronization with the lyrics, reinforcing phrases such as “The sun rises in the east, the sun sets in the west.” Initially Nancy had rehearsed and demonstrated the actions herself, believing the clear visual demonstrations would aid comprehension. However, in her reflection she noted that while students showed initial interest, they struggled to connect song lyrics with the required directional concepts. Nancy identified this difficulty as stemming from a lack of foundational understanding of directions among her students. She summarized that her students needed clearer preparation and more concrete

support, such as visual aids like pictures of sunrise and sunset, to make abstract concepts more accessible and engaging.

For Rachel's lesson, she planned to use a song called "Great Shapes" to help students review shape patterns. Rachel's instructional strategy included a combination of singing, dancing, and collaborative physical formation, designed to engage her students actively. Anticipating potential challenges, she suspected that the song's lyrics and the complexity of forming accurate shapes with their bodies might pose difficulties. Nonetheless, Rachel's reflection revealed pleasant surprises; the singing and dancing were highly engaging, with the students enthusiastically participating and attentively following her demonstrations. She expressed excitement at observing how quickly the children adapted, managing to sing along by following the lyrics on the whiteboard. Despite this success, she noticed that during the formation activity, the students primarily used their arms, creating uneven and somewhat disorganized shapes. Rachel recognized this limitation as an opportunity for creative improvement. She planned to offer better demonstrations next time, possibly including videos to showcase different ways of using their bodies, not limiting them to arms alone, thus fostering more creative and precise shape-making.

Session Four: Debrief and Reflection

In this week's teacher study group meeting, Ivy, Nancy, and Rachel revisited their lessons from last week, expanding on the written reflections they had already submitted. Ivy began by describing the engagement levels in her class, noting that while many children eagerly followed her directional gestures, "a few children appeared somewhat passive; I think it might be because my demonstration wasn't clear enough." She cited moments where a lack of unified rhythm caused brief confusion, prompting her to consider simpler melodies and more consistent physical

cues in the future. Nancy followed by mentioning the persistent difficulty some students faced in grasping directional concepts from her lesson, recognizing that "they struggled to connect the lyrics with the required movements," especially when English words like "east" and "west" had not been explicitly introduced. Rachel, who focused on shapes in her classroom, recounted that the children sang and danced enthusiastically to "Great Shapes" but tended to rely solely on their arms when forming triangles or rectangles. She explained how this led to somewhat lopsided shapes, jokingly calling the results "crooked and twisted," yet emphasizing her excitement at their willingness to participate. By reflecting together, the three teachers recognized that common challenges—such as rhythmic clarity or incomplete background knowledge—often inhibited maximum engagement, confirming that purposeful demonstrations and preparatory steps were crucial.

As they collectively examined their approaches, the teachers brainstormed ways to build stronger connections between music, gestures, and the target academic content. Ivy expressed interest in more energetic warm-up activities that better capture her students' attention, while Nancy underscored the importance of concrete illustrations like compass drawings or pictures of a sunrise to support abstract directional terms. Rachel similarly planned to expand her demonstrations for the shape-formation activity, acknowledging that "if I had shown various body parts in action first, the children might not have relied solely on using their arms." Each teacher also highlighted the practicality of short, repetitive songs, agreeing that familiar melodies fostered greater confidence in children who might hesitate to sing or move. By the end of reflection, they agreed that intentionally introducing new words or concepts in tandem with engaging music could be more effective than expecting learners to grasp everything through a single listening.

Session 4: Discussion and Implementation

With the reading materials on reintroducing familiar songs fresh in their minds, the teachers commenced this discussion by noting how revisiting melodies could reinforce students' confidence and active involvement. Ivy led off by referencing her plan to extend a direction-themed tune, explaining, "You can see that my sharing this week is based on a song we used before, and now I'm adding more game elements." She believed that using a previously introduced song would help children recall essential language while adding novelty, such as fresh movement cues or a secret-song puzzle. Nancy suggested coupling the reintroduction with simple recall prompts—asking which words they heard or which gestures matched the lines—so that students would "listen to the song with questions in mind instead of not knowing what to listen for." Rachel echoed these ideas, describing how reintroducing a number-pattern song enabled her learners to jump right back into skip counting with minimal review, a strategy she planned to refine further. They all agreed that inviting the children to lead segments of the song, or to hum a concealed melody for classmates to identify, would transform routine repetition into a playful, puzzle-like experience. Pointing to the reading's emphasis on "deeper musical comprehension," they underscored how small changes—like different tempos or creative movement—could revive a familiar piece and solidify students' engagement.

After exchanging examples, the teachers turned their focus to how these reintroduction strategies might mesh with each of their upcoming lessons. Ivy wanted to adapt the secret-song approach by clapping out a short snippet, prompting students to guess which part of the familiar melody it belonged to, and then having them sing it out as a group. Nancy, on the other hand, contemplated using "more visual support," like flashcards with partial lyrics, so that children could fill in the missing words from memory. Rachel highlighted that "having children lead part

of the song is actually better than me always singing," reasoning that active student leadership would foster stronger recall and higher enthusiasm. They also discussed linking older songs with current content, letting children see how the same tune could introduce slightly varied vocabulary. As we wrapped up, the teachers agreed to try at least one reintroduction technique and share detailed outcomes in their reflections the following week.

Post-Session Weekly Sharing

Session Five's reading material explored the concept of Part Singing, emphasizing that singing in harmony offers a richer musical experience compared to singing in unison. The text defined part singing as the process where different groups or individuals sing different melodic or rhythmic lines simultaneously, requiring careful listening and interdependence. It outlineed clear musical goals: creating harmonious music together, fostering interdependent performance where each singer contributes a distinct part, and encouraging active listening to complement other parts. The reading material introduced three primary methods for part singing—partner songs, rounds, and ostinati—which each provide unique avenues for students to engage in cooperative singing. It stressed that successful part singing depends on students' familiarity with the song, as they must know it well enough to perform their parts independently before focusing on listening to others. Moreover, the text reminded teachers of being mindful of competitive attitudes and suggested using terms like "section" and "part" to promote a sense of ensemble rather than rivalry. Overall, the reading underscored that the practice of part singing can help to refine musical accuracy and sensitivity to dynamics and nurture a collective musical expression that is essential for a vibrant classroom music experience.

Session Five

Pre-Session Individual Submissions

For last week's lesson, Ivy planned and designed an activity based on the secret song method, using non-symbolic gestures as a playful method to engage her class. She would begin by clapping to establish a clear rhythm, then transition to stomping her feet, finally humming the melody softly, inviting the children to guess the familiar song. Ivy anticipated that this strategy would encourage students to listen closely and observe carefully, enhancing their auditory and visual attentiveness. In practice, she noticed that most children were initially attentive and successfully participated in guessing the melody, though a few students seemed hesitant or showed lower interest. Ivy realized through her reflection that at times, the song's length and unfamiliar rhythmic patterns made it challenging for some students to fully engage. She also acknowledged that her own rhythmic demonstration required improvement, as clearer gestures leading to steadier beats could have simplified the guessing process. Despite these challenges, Ivy observed that the students genuinely enjoyed the game, especially when the familiar English lyrics resonated with them. This observation reinforced her belief in the effectiveness of using recognizable melodies in language learning activities. Moving forward, Ivy planned to improve her own rhythmic presentation and to regularly introduce new English songs, potentially using varied props like drums or guitars to further engage her students.

Nancy organized her lesson to review the silent E rule for CVCE words with her class. She planned to use the secret song strategy, starting the lesson by clapping a rhythm to help students recall a previously learned song associated with the silent-E spelling rule. Nancy's plan included first clapping out the rhythm, then prompting students to guess the song, followed by collectively humming or singing the melody with appropriate lyrics. Although she felt confident that rhythmic clues would effectively prompt the students' memories, she anticipated potential confusion due to the complexity of the lyrics. During her lesson, Nancy observed that students

showed considerable interest during the rhythm-clapping introduction, and a few quickly guessed the correct song, guiding the rest of the class to join in singing. However, she noted that overall participation was lower than she had hoped, with some students struggling to recall lyrics due to their complexity. Reflecting on this experience, Nancy recognized the importance of simplifying lyrics to enhance student participation and learning effectiveness. She concluded that although rhythm-based activities are highly engaging, the songs must be carefully selected or adapted to match students' language proficiency levels.

For her lesson, Rachel prepared a lesson focused on mathematics, specifically number patterns by revisiting a song previously learned through playful, active participation. She planned to begin the lesson with skip-counting exercises using physical activities, like jumping in and out of circles to the rhythm of counting numbers, to physically cue students' memories of the song. Rachel aimed to support students' recall by initially asking if anyone remembered the song, planning to hum the melody if no one could immediately recall it. She also intended to integrate rhythmic clapping, linking movement and music to reinforce the skip-counting number pattern. In her reflection after the class, Rachel noted that her initial worries about whether the students would recall the song quickly faded as one child confidently recognized and began singing, prompting enthusiastic participation from the rest of the class. She observed that students' previous familiarity with skip counting and physical activities significantly aided their ability to quickly reconnect with the song and enthusiastically participate. The successful implementation boosted Rachel's confidence, transforming her initial uncertainty into excitement and satisfaction. However, she realized the necessity of preparing more clearly defined alternatives for when children struggled to remember the melody. Rachel decided to continue exploring and

collecting age-appropriate and content-specific songs that could help facilitate easier recall and enhance her lessons further.

Session Five: Debrief and Reflection

In this week's teacher study group session, the three teachers elaborated on their Week Four lessons, verbally sharing the core reflections they had previously documented in their reflection forms. They agreed that while the details echoed what they had already written, discussing them aloud allowed for new angles and a deeper collective understanding. Ivy began by clarifying how she used clapping, stomping, and humming, stressing that "A few children seemed disengaged, possibly because my rhythmic demonstration wasn't clear enough." She explained that most of her students quickly guessed the melody, yet the handful who struggled suggested the need for simpler patterns in the future. This revelation prompted her to think about shorter songs or more conspicuous gestures so that every child could catch on. Ivy added that although the children's partial hesitance was slightly discouraging, she was encouraged by their evident enjoyment once they recognized the tune. Her plan was to practice her own pacing and introduce an expanded range of songs on a regular basis to spark sustained excitement for music activities.

Nancy echoed Ivy's reflections and then delved into her own experiences reviewing the silent E rule. She recalled, "Initially, I assumed the children would pick up on the vocabulary words, but I realized they weren't really catching them." From her perspective, the complexity of the lyrics and unfamiliar phrasing sometimes overshadowed the intended content, prompting her to vow to incorporate simpler lines or a more gradual introduction of vocabulary in future song-based lessons. Rachel joined the conversation with observations from her number-pattern activity, noting that the children's prompt skip-counting recall was encouraging but still left a

few who hesitated to participate fully. She referenced her own singing concerns, saying, "Frankly, I don't think I'm very good at singing," yet recognized that the students appreciated her efforts more than she had expected. After these reflections, I guided everyone into the next step: Discussion and Implementation. The teachers then shifted their focus to exploring fresh ideas for the upcoming lessons.

Session Five: Discussion and Implementation

The teachers began by revisiting the pre-session reading materials on part singing, which emphasized partner songs, rounds, and ostinati as promising strategies for elevating musical and collaborative skills. We remembered that successful part singing rests on students' familiarity with a song and their comfort in maintaining independent vocal lines. Ivy was the first to respond, expressing curiosity about dividing a familiar melody into separate parts so children wouldn't inadvertently synchronize with each other's lines. She remarked, "If we're doing part singing, I think the hardest part is making sure they're not pulled away by someone else's melody." Nancy affirmed this concern, suggesting a gentler introduction by beginning with simpler two-line partner songs before layering additional vocal parts. Rachel focused on potential classroom management hurdles, explaining that some students might refuse to sing once they perceive the complexity, and stated, "My concern is that some kids might refuse to sing at all, especially if they find it too difficult."

The teachers then discussed specific applications of part singing for their upcoming lessons, brainstorming how to merge the new techniques with their existing curriculum. Ivy shared a tentative idea of combining two lines—one group singing "Circle North" and another "Run Around"—hoping that coupling music with movement would help children hold steady on their own part. Nancy considered creating a short round using simpler English phrases so that

students could layer their voices without feeling overwhelmed by complex lyrics. Rachel echoed these possibilities, though she admitted to uncertainty about ensuring full participation if only a portion of the class remembered the original melody. Despite the exchange, the teachers did not settle on a concrete plan for immediate classroom use before the end of the session.

Post-Session Weekly Sharing

For next week, Session Six's readings centered on the critical role of movement in music education, emphasizing that singing naturally involves physical action and that integrating movement helps maintain the musicality of a song. The material warned against letting songs become overly mechanical by neglecting the expressive power of movement and offers techniques like chinning, inner hearing, and antiphonning alongside movement to preserve a song's wholeness. It explained that movement can be both expressive and demonstrative, allowing students to physically experience musical phrases, rhythmic patterns, and melodic contours. Educators are encouraged to use whole-body actions, fine motor skills, and even specific gestures like tapping or clapping to highlight cadence points and coordinate with the song's rhythm and melody. The text outlined primary goals for movement, such as connecting listening with physical expression, emphasizing musical elements, and maintaining the structural integrity of a song while omitting words where appropriate. Supplementary examples illustrated various strategies—ranging from marching and skipping to expressive hand signs and tapping—to reinforce rhythm, melody, dynamics, and musical form. Overall, the integration of movement can not only enrich students' sensory experience of music but also enhance their listening skills and engagement in a fun, interactive way.

Session Six

Pre-Session Individual Submissions

For her lesson last week, Ivy decided to introduce an activity based on the part singing strategy, incorporating a song that her students had previously learned to reinforce vocabulary and promote cooperative engagement. Ivy planned to begin the session by inviting students to recall and perform an English song called Circle Left, setting a playful yet structured atmosphere. She intended to demonstrate how to perform the divided chorus, using explicit gestures and simple verbal instructions so that children would confidently participate in both singing and physical actions. Specifically, Ivy chose this simple, familiar tune, dividing students into groups to alternate between lyrics such as “circle north” and “run or move,” while the rest performed corresponding movements, reinforcing directional vocabulary and cooperative participation. During her reflection afterward, Ivy noticed high student engagement, noting that the simplicity of the chosen song greatly facilitated active participation, even among children who initially seemed hesitant. However, she observed that a few children struggled with recalling certain lyrics, which slightly disrupted the game’s flow and their speed of response during the activity. Ivy felt encouraged by the children's overall enthusiasm and recognized the positive impact of integrating simple melodies with meaningful movements. She concluded that future lessons could further benefit from preliminary vocabulary reviews to reinforce lyric understanding and make transitions smoother. Ivy also reflected on the importance of continuing to choose songs and activities that were both enjoyable and pedagogically supportive, balancing fun with educational purpose.

Nancy prepared her lesson to teach the soft C pronunciation to her students using a chant, which then can be turned into a variation of part singing using chanting instead of singing. She planned to begin the lesson by highlighting examples of soft C words from a list on the interactive whiteboard, emphasizing their unique pronunciation before vowels i, e, and y. To

support students' understanding, Nancy decided to use a chant without background music, enabling children to focus purely on the words' phonetic features. She planned to integrate the chosen words, such as "circle," "city," and "cycle," directly into the chant, reinforcing spelling and pronunciation simultaneously. During the actual lesson, Nancy quickly realized that the rhythmic nature of chanting without musical accompaniment posed challenges for students, making it difficult for some to maintain the correct rhythm. While most children initially grasped the chant, Nancy observed noticeable difficulty during the partner singing activity; the students struggled to sustain their parts independently. As a result, Nancy promptly adjusted the lesson, shifting from partner singing back to a whole-class chorus, ensuring all students remained actively engaged. Reflecting on this challenge, she recognized the need to anticipate students' varying rhythmic abilities and language proficiency levels when designing chants. For future improvements, Nancy decided to incorporate classroom strategies related to interactive games to increase student participation and attentiveness during language-focused singing activities.

In her lesson, Rachel aimed to teach writing conventions to her students through an adapted musical approach, specifically using a modified version of the song "You Are My Sunshine." Her lesson began with an introductory activity where students first listened to and then sang the song together, establishing familiarity with the tune. Rachel creatively changed the lyrics to reflect writing conventions; the lyrics will be explained in a later section. Intending this approach to reinforce grammatical rules through melodic memory, she planned to divide the class into groups, with each group singing specific lyrics, reinforcing both individual responsibility and cooperative group participation. Rachel anticipated some difficulty, that the students were initially unfamiliar with "You Are My Sunshine," which could impact their initial ability to sing confidently. Her reflection confirmed this anticipation, noting that students

struggled initially due to unfamiliarity with the song. However, she also observed that repeated practice significantly improved students' comfort and participation levels, eventually allowing them to sing confidently along with the modified lyrics. Rachel noted particular difficulty in singing certain lyrics clearly, prompting her to consider choosing more familiar songs or revising problematic lines for future lessons.

Session Six: Debrief and Reflection

Ivy reflected on her part singing activity with both insight and a touch of self-criticism. She explained that her main challenge was that she might have been too fixated on achieving a complete duet performance, saying, “The problem is that when I planned this activity, I thought I had to force a complete duet out of it,” which made her feel that she had drilled herself into a corner. Watching the video afterward, she observed that the children were overwhelmed by the demand for immediate output; they had too many elements to process at once, resulting in sparse feedback. Ivy noted that she decided to cut the song into very short segments so that students only needed to sing a little at a time, which helped in managing their responses. She emphasized that for the strategy to work, the children must be very familiar with the song and remain focused, so that even a small lapse in attention would disrupt the performance. Ivy also pointed out that if a student is required to sing a long phrase, they simply cannot hold the rhythm, which confirms that a simpler, more segmented approach might be more effective. Despite these challenges, she appreciated the learning process, remarking that even failure in this context is part of a valuable teacher research and development process.

Rachel and Nancy contributed additional insights that underscored both the promise and the pitfalls of the activity. Rachel presented her modified version of “You Are My Sunshine” which she had altered the lyrics to teach writing conventions with the intention of using it for

part singing later. She presented the song to her students but adapted it to emphasize essential writing components that matched her curriculum objectives. The new lyrics were: *A big letter begins my sentence, and there are spaces between my words. Now I know how to write a sentence, and put punctuation at the end*. However, she was struck by the initial shock when she realized that some students did not even know the original song, so much so that she had to repeat it twice before the class began; she recalled, "I was a bit shocked because they didn't know the song at all, so I had them listen twice before starting," which highlighted the need for better pre-class preparation. She observed that the final line, particularly the punctuation part, felt cumbersome and disrupted the flow of the singing, suggesting that adjustments in the lyric structure might be necessary.

Nancy, on the other hand, found inspiration in her challenging lesson and expressed that sometimes a failure in achieving the desired output actually provided an opportunity to re-strategize; she mentioned, "When a teacher's approach fails, it is still part of our research and development process," reflecting her belief in iterative improvement. Both teachers agreed that reducing the number of roles or parts each student was responsible for could ease the cognitive load, allowing them to catch on more quickly to the cues. They discussed the importance of balancing fun and engagement with structured guidance—ensuring that while the activity remains playful, it still meets the educational objectives. Overall, they felt that with additional scaffolding, such as clearer gestures and more gradual transitions between parts, part singing could improve students' rhythmic coordination and focus, enhancing both musical and language learning in the classroom.

Session Six: Discussion and Implementation

During this week, the discussion centered on enhancing the role of movement in musical learning, with a particular focus on how physical actions can enrich students' engagement and comprehension. Ivy shared her innovative design, stating, "I think this week has reached our class's comfort zone," as she explained that her Thanksgiving-themed "Turkey Dance" was selected because its lyrics naturally lend themselves to very direct movements. She elaborated that her lesson plan was built on previously familiar song-based activities where students sang and danced without heavy reliance on explicit instructions, enabling them to effortlessly blend singing with movement. Ivy believed that the activity effectively consolidated learning when she used the song to reinforce the four cardinal directions from her previous lesson. While I trusted Ivy with her ideas, I challenged her, as well as other teachers, to think outside the box and not revert to their traditional methods of using movement, urging them to explore novel approaches that integrate new rhythmic and kinetic elements. Ivy concluded that with further refinements, such as incorporating student-generated gestures and allocating more time for leader-led segments, the strategy would become even more effective in deepening students' internalization of musical cues.

In addition to Ivy's ideas, both Rachel and Nancy provided insights on integrating movement with academic content. Rachel proposed a creative approach for her writing conversion activities, suggesting, "For example, my three writing conversion parts: when they sing 'big letter,' let them do a letter exercise with their own initials," and she described a "punctuation movement" where students stand up and mimic a symbol when punctuation is mentioned. She emphasized that such specific, demonstrative movements could not only aid in reinforcing musical rhythm but also support writing conventions by linking physical actions with language rules. Nancy contributed by underscoring the importance of aligning movement with

clear verbal cues, noting that when students are prompted to perform actions corresponding to a song's rhythm, their overall recall of the material improves significantly. Both teachers agreed that integrating deliberate, coordinated movement into lessons serves as a bridge between auditory learning and physical expression, fostering both engagement and academic retention. The conversation culminated in a consensus that purposeful movement could transform classroom dynamics and enhance both musical understanding and overall learning outcomes, which the teachers took away from the session and agreed to think more deeply about what they intended to implement.

Post-Session Weekly Sharing

Session Seven's reading material focused on Chinning, a technique that involves singing a melody using neutral syllables such as "doo" instead of the actual words. Chinning originated in the Maritime Provinces of Canada and is considered the folk equivalent of scat singing, historically used when no instruments were available. This method can allow students to neutralize the distracting effects of vowels and consonants, enabling them to focus on the pitches, tones, and rhythmic patterns of a song in its simplest form. By using chinning, teachers can help students isolate and better understand repeated notes and patterns, making it a valuable tool for both whole songs and selected phrases. The primary goals of chinning include clarifying the melody by masking the linguistic elements, providing a controlled way to study specific musical segments, and maintaining the overall structure of the song while omitting words. Practical applications include using chinning to recall a song, to highlight repeated tones or rhythms, and even to pinpoint specific melody patterns within a piece. According to Bennet and Bartholow (1997), chinning not only improves focused listening but also encourages a deeper

connection with the music by allowing students to engage with it without the interference of lyrics, thereby reinforcing their musical understanding and performance skills.

Session Seven

Pre-Session Individual Submissions

For her lesson last week, Ivy planned to engage her students through the "Turkey Dance," a musical video that incorporated listening and movement in an interactive warm-up activity. She envisioned starting the lesson by having students attentively listen to the song, carefully observing how the lyrics corresponded to specific dance movements. Ivy anticipated that the children would synchronize their movements effectively with the song's rhythmic instructions, thereby deepening their comprehension of the lyrics. During the actual lesson, she noticed with satisfaction that most children clearly understood the actions, performing each movement confidently and enthusiastically. She found it particularly encouraging that students showed genuine enjoyment, even enthusiastically requesting an additional round of the dance activity. However, Ivy reflected that the allocated time fell short of allowing the students to lead the activity themselves, an aspect she recognized as important for fostering leadership and autonomy. She noted that if more time were available in the future, she would invite students to hum the song themselves and coordinate the dance moves independently. This experience strengthened Ivy's belief that combining auditory instructions with physical movement significantly enhances active student engagement and helps students internalize content effectively. Moving forward, she planned to prioritize sufficient activity time, ensuring students would have ample opportunities to take leadership roles within musical activities.

Nancy designed her Week Six lesson focusing on reinforcing rhythm comprehension and enhancing understanding of position and direction through fine motor movements. She planned

to initiate her lesson by reviewing the four cardinal directions previously taught, immediately followed by a rhythmic activity using the “Directions” song. Nancy intended for students to tap along with the song’s rhythm, building an auditory and kinesthetic connection. She then planned a specific exercise in which students were required to stop tapping at the exact moment they heard the phrase "in the..."—challenging their rhythmic awareness and listening skills simultaneously. Nancy anticipated that the rapid pace of the song could make this precise stopping difficult for students, and planned an alternative approach of singing the song slowly if the initial strategy proved too challenging. Reflecting afterward, she acknowledged that, although students were generally able to tap rhythmically, many struggled to accurately pause at the predetermined points in the song. Nancy realized this difficulty indicated the rhythm point needed clearer marking or adjustment. To address this challenge, she planned to experiment further with different songs, rhythms, and repeated practices to gradually develop her students’ precision and rhythmic awareness.

In her Week 6 lesson, Rachel intended to integrate movement into the song “You Are My Sunshine” by having the students perform actions for each writing convention line. She planned to have the children use body movements to illustrate the concepts of a big letter, spaces between words, sentence structure, and punctuation. She intended to play the familiar song during the Intro phase and then guide the class in combining the lyrics with corresponding actions. She planned to demonstrate each part of the song by performing actions that represented “big letter,” “spaces,” “write,” and “punctuation.” She anticipated that the use of movement would help the children internalize the writing conventions more effectively. In her reflection, she observed that the students actively considered creative ways to depict these concepts, especially finding numerous ideas for representing punctuation. She noted that the familiar melody made it easier

for the students to follow along. She adjusted her strategy by reducing her demonstration for particular elements of the song to allow more independent creativity. She observed that, although the children were generally successful in combining movement with the song, some aspects of the demonstration limited their own ideas. Overall, she felt confident that the integration of movement reinforced the lesson objectives, and she planned to provide more freedom for self-generated actions in future lessons.

Session Seven: Debrief and Reflection

In the first part of the debrief, Ivy reflected on how her approach to music activities had grown more purpose-driven than before. She recalled, "Originally, I wasn't using music and movement with a clear purpose—maybe just as a warm-up—and I didn't mind if some children opted out." She explained that, in the past, her main goal was to boost energy at the start of class, without worrying too much about alignment with specific language or content objectives. Over time, however, she came to see the importance of intentionally designing these musical moments to reinforce both engagement and skill development. Ivy added, "In the past, I never considered combining listening and movement so deliberately, but now I see how they can work together to keep more kids involved from the start." From her perspective, greater clarity in her lesson design—particularly around listening cues and physical actions—helped children respond immediately rather than drifting off during lengthy instructions. Yet she also acknowledged that a few students still disengaged at times, reinforcing her belief that thoughtful planning and simpler transitions at times may be vital to consistent participation.

Nancy detailed her own experience attempting a more rhythm-centered lesson, admitting it turned out differently than she had envisioned. She explained, "Last week, I thought I'd challenge them with a new rhythm pattern, but once I introduced that stop-and-go element, it

turned out much harder than I expected." Her plan was to have students clap and pause precisely on key phrases from the song "The sun is rising in the east," yet it proved tricky to coordinate in real time. Nancy remarked with a laugh, "I tried to be creative, but the lesson didn't go as planned," underscoring the tension between innovation and practical classroom realities. Still, she found an upside to the week's challenges, saying, "If I change the lyrics and repeat 'the east' multiple times, it might be easier for them to hear and remember," suggesting that simplifying lyrics or repeating target words can help children identify essential vocabulary without confusion. She also mentioned that some of her soft-sound practice went more smoothly, but the misalignment of tempo and phrasing pointed to a need for incremental steps in any new rhythmic activity.

Rachel then weighed in, describing an alternative challenge in her writing lesson that used physical actions to represent parts of a sentence. She recounted, "I feel it's best not to give them too many constraints because if I show them exactly how to do something, they lose that spark of creativity." One example involved acting out a "space" between words; however, after her demonstration, the children simply mimicked her move rather than crafting their own unique interpretation; she used her arms spread out to represent the "space," which the students copied. Rachel concluded that students might benefit from an initial brainstorming phase, with examples provided only when they genuinely appeared to be stuck. Building on this idea, Nancy noted that similar issues arose in her lessons and shared her plan to simplify future "direction" lyrics by repeating target words like "east" and "west" to reduce cognitive overload. "Next time I teach writing, I'm going to try your idea," she added, commending Rachel's flexible approach and its potential applicability across subjects. Ivy echoed this enthusiasm by saying, "I might also incorporate it in my writing lesson," believing such a method could help her class avoid blending

incorrect verb forms. Sensing a surge of collective insight, I applauded the teachers' lively exchange, remarking that these "aha" moments did more than just inspire new activities—they reminded everyone why thoughtful collaboration makes teaching so richly rewarding. "I was initially unsure how the teacher study group would go, but these moments of 'aha' proved how much synergy you've generated," urging them to keep experimenting and refining.

Session Seven: Discussion and Implementation

In this session, the teachers focused on exploring "chinning" as a strategy to simplify vocal delivery and enhance rhythmic awareness. I explained, "The repetition of sounds is like this: instead of singing 'circle left, du-o du-o,' we simply use a sound like 'lu' each time," emphasizing that replacing full lyrics with onomatopoeic syllables could reduce cognitive load for students. Ivy further clarified, "Singing with chinning means essentially replacing the actual words on the melody," suggesting that this technique might allow students to concentrate on rhythm and movement rather than getting bogged down in complex lyrics. The group discussed how shifting from teacher-led demonstrations to student-initiated chinning could help children internalize musical patterns more naturally. They noted that while previous activities had relied on complete lyrics, the chinning method offered a simpler scaffold, making it easier for children to access the song and participate actively. Moreover, the teachers observed that a repetitive, simplified vocal approach could lead to greater consistency in participation and improved focus during the activity. The discussion revealed that chinning holds promise as a method to bridge the gap between passive listening and active, creative engagement.

Building on these reflections, the teachers outlined several practical steps to integrate chinning into their future lessons. Ivy admitted some initial uncertainty about execution, remarking, "Right now, the ideas I've thought of are not easy to implement," yet she said she

remained open to experimentation and refinement. The consensus was to use a familiar melody as the foundation, gradually replacing complex lyrics with simple sounds to allow students to focus on the rhythmic structure. Nancy proposed that by scaffolding the activity, students would eventually internalize the rhythm and be able to add their own creative variations. The teachers agreed that linking chinning with coordinated physical movements would reinforce the overall learning objectives, merging auditory, vocal, and kinesthetic elements. At the end of the session, the teachers did not settle individual implementation plans and decided to complete the task on their own.

Post-Session Weekly Sharing

Session Eight's reading material centered on the concept of inner hearing, which is the ability to hear words, melodies, and sounds internally without any external auditory input. It is a crucial skill that enables students to read music, match pitches, and silently rehearse songs. Without inner hearing, learners would be limited to processing one sound at a time, hindering their ability to imagine or recall music. This skill can allow them to connect individual sounds into flowing musical phrases and supports the perception of tonality and meter. The text offered several practical strategies to develop inner hearing, such as the "lips-only" approach, where students move their lips to the words while keeping the song in their minds. Additional techniques involve using gesture games and focusing on specific tonal and rhythmic patterns to deepen the internalization process. Ultimately, cultivating inner hearing empowers students to decode musical notation and enhances their overall musical creativity and comprehension.

Session Eight

Pre-Session Individual Submissions

For her Week 7 lesson, Ivy planned to creatively combine the strategies from previous sessions and use chinning as a fresh way to engage her class. Specifically, she chose the familiar song "Row, Row, Row Your Boat" to introduce the lesson through playful syllabic sounds. Her intention was for students to listen attentively, guess the song from different sound cues, and then sing it aloud while performing expressive movements that matched the song's lyrics. In implementing this approach, Ivy hoped the children would actively interpret auditory signals, translating their understanding into coordinated physical responses. Reflecting afterward, Ivy noted with satisfaction that most students enthusiastically participated, quickly guessing the song and engaging energetically in the actions. However, she observed some inconsistencies, noting that a few students became overly excited, performing exaggerated movements that did not always align with the intended rhythm. Nevertheless, Ivy was delighted to find that the activity enhanced the children's focus and interest, as they seemed to enjoy the challenge of linking sounds, lyrics, and movements. Recognizing the effectiveness of the multi-sensory method, Ivy planned future refinements to better balance the playful aspects with clear instructions, ensuring all students could sustain accurate and coordinated movements throughout the entire song.

Nancy prepared her Week Seven class aiming to reinforce soft C and soft G vocabulary through a combination of secret songs and chinning. Her strategy involved first revisiting the soft pronunciation rules, then introducing a chant in which students would identify and chant targeted vocabulary words together. Nancy intended for the students to listen closely for the soft-sound cues, recite them clearly, and actively engage by participating in a relay-style chanting activity using vocabulary cards prior to adopt chinning. Her plan anticipated possible difficulties with rhythm and individual response speed, especially in the structured relay format. Reflecting afterward, Nancy noted a positive initial reaction, with two groups immediately chanting

confidently upon hearing the cues, greatly energizing the classroom atmosphere. However, she observed some hesitation among students when transitioning from group chanting to individual relay responses, as a few children struggled to immediately recall words. Realizing this challenge, Nancy considered reverting to simpler, collective singing if the individual relay chanting proved too difficult, thus providing no scaffolding for chinning which was supposed to come next.

Rachel planned a lesson for her class combining the use of a secret song and chinning techniques to reinforce directional vocabulary during a science lesson. Her approach involved reintroducing the previously taught "Direction Song," which she hoped students would recall through melodic hints and movement cues. Rachel intended to integrate chinning by having students vocalize the melody using neutral "doo" sounds, linking their auditory memory with directional vocabulary through motion-based activities. To facilitate recall, she planned to display visual aids, including a compass rose and play the song's audio as additional support. During the lesson, Rachel observed initial success, noting that a student quickly recalled the song once melodic hints were provided, stimulating enthusiastic participation from the class. However, she experienced minor frustration during the chinning activity, candidly admitting in her reflection that she herself struggled with accurately demonstrating the melody, temporarily affecting the activity's flow. Rachel recognized that while higher-level students excelled, others found the "doo" method challenging, highlighting disparities in students' musical recall abilities. Feeling a combination of confidence and mild frustration, she identified the need for additional practice for herself in chinning to provide clearer, more consistent demonstrations in future sessions. Rachel concluded by acknowledging the effectiveness of combining familiar melodies

with gestures and neutral vocalizations, planning strategic refinements to enhance participation and engagement in her future lessons.

Session Eight: Debrief and Reflection

Reflecting on her Week 7 lesson, Ivy shared that her attempt to merge chinning with action produced an unexpectedly rich blend of strategies. She explained, "Last week, I used the combination of chinning and action – it almost ended up including the secret song as well," and noted that using familiar songs resulted in almost instantaneous positive feedback, with students quickly guessing the tune and engaging with the movements. Ivy observed that the students' focused expressions—what she described as "the quality of their concentration rather than just participation"—were a clear indication of improved engagement; she could see from their eyes and expressions that they were truly listening and thinking about the song cues. However, Ivy also acknowledged some challenges: while most of the children responded well, a few became overly animated, exaggerating their movements in ways that disrupted the intended rhythm. This observation reinforced her belief that balancing free expression with structured guidance was essential. Ivy planned to allocate more time for student-led activities in the future so that they could further develop both leadership and more refined, coordinated responses. Her reflection affirmed that a multi-sensory approach—integrating auditory, visual, and kinesthetic cues—can deepen engagement and help students internalize content, even though it may require further adjustments to ensure consistency across the class.

Rachel and Nancy also contributed insights into the session's successes and challenges. Rachel recounted her experience of integrating a secret song with chinning techniques to reinforce directional vocabulary, noting that while one student immediately recalled the melody when provided with melodic hints, she herself occasionally struggled with accurately

demonstrating the “doo” sound, which disrupted the smooth flow of the activity. “I feel that on its own chinning is difficult for me, but combining this technique with some of our previous strategies could work well,” she remarked, suggesting that a more integrated approach might help streamline the process and better achieve the lesson objectives. Meanwhile, Nancy reflected on her lesson designed to reinforce soft C and soft G vocabulary through a secret song and a relay-style chanting activity. Although two groups of students responded confidently to the cues, some others hesitated during the transition to individual responses, highlighting difficulties with immediate recall and rhythm, which Nancy believed was a result of her inclusion of the chinning method. Both teachers found chinning difficult to implement, but agreed that incorporating additional sensory cues—such as secret sounds and coordinated gestures—could help with conducting their lessons. Collectively, the group recognized that while our integrated, multi-sensory approach enhanced student concentration and engagement, iterative adjustments and collaborative feedback would be crucial for refining these methods to meet our educational goals.

Session Eight: Discussion and Implementation

During the second half of the session, we discussed the concept of inner hearing and its potential to transform our musical activities. Ivy vividly recalled, “I used to experience it like this… when you watch a movie or TV show, if the soundtrack is of a genre you love, the melody keeps echoing in your mind,” emphasizing how familiar tunes often linger internally without external sound. She further elaborated, “There’s a point when it isn’t the melody that replays in your head, but rather lines from the movie—those dialogues that repeat over and over,” which resonated with everyone as a common experience of internal auditory recall. This recollection helped us all understand that inner hearing is not merely about reproducing a tune; it is about the

continuous mental engagement with sounds, whether musical or spoken. The teachers discussed how this innate ability could be harnessed to help students better internalize rhythm and pitch, thereby strengthening their overall musical memory. Many agreed that developing inner hearing could serve as the bridge between active vocal practice and silent mental rehearsal, a critical skill for both music and language learning. Our conversation highlighted that by tapping into the natural human propensity for internalizing sound, we could design more engaging and cognitively demanding activities for our students.

Building on these insights, the group explored practical ways to incorporate inner hearing exercises into our lesson plans. Ivy suggested adapting her existing chinning and movement routines by integrating deliberate silent intervals during which students would internally recall the melody before vocalizing it. She proposed that teachers might start with short silent segments and gradually extend these periods as students become more accustomed to the practice. Rachel contributed by emphasizing the need for clear rhythmic cues to support the transition from external listening to inner hearing, noting that the familiar tunes could serve as anchors for this process. Nancy shared ideas for using visual prompts to scaffold the exercise, ensuring that even students with less developed musical skills could engage effectively. The teachers agreed that, in addition to these strategies, regular practice sessions focused solely on inner hearing could improve students' concentration. Ivy remarked that this approach might even reduce off-task behavior, as the silent practice forces a deeper level of focus and self-monitoring. The discussion led to a consensus that inner hearing is a critical skill worth cultivating, and that with thoughtful, incremental implementation, it could become a powerful component of our teaching repertoire. The teachers exited the session feeling excited about this week's lesson to come.

Post-Session Weekly Sharing

For next week, Session Nine's reading material introduced the concept of antiphonning, a technique in which a leader and responders alternate singing successive parts of a song, creating a seamless musical performance. Antiphonning is defined as a fill-in-the-blank activity where the leader sings a section and the responders immediately continue when the leader stops, making the song sound as if one continuous voice is performing it. This method not only challenges students to be attentive and responsive but also hones their inner hearing skills as they mentally track the entire melody. The primary goals of antiphonning include developing musical responsiveness, ensuring smooth transitions between parts, and engaging learners in a collective exploration of the song's structure. By alternating parts, students learn to focus on the complete flow of the song rather than on isolated segments, which enhances their ability to correct mistakes in words, melody, or rhythm. Additionally, the reading outlined various strategies for introducing antiphonning—such as using gestures, practicing with eyes closed, and assigning student leaders—to deepen listening and coordination, hoping it can foster a cooperative and enriched musical environment where every student contributes to the overall performance.

Session Nine

Pre-Session Individual Submissions

Ivy planned to introduce her students to the concept of inner hearing by using familiar songs such as "Row, Row, Row Your Boat" and "You Are My Sunshine." She decided to start the lesson by silently singing a familiar tune, using clear mouth movements without producing any sound. Ivy's goal was for her students to observe closely, carefully interpret her mouth movements, and guess the song before singing it aloud as a group. She hoped this activity would engage her students, encouraging them to internalize melodies and develop their auditory imagination. Reflecting afterward, Ivy noted with excitement that her students responded

positively, paying close attention to her silent singing and accurately guessing the songs, even adding spontaneous movements. She felt encouraged by their eagerness to participate and was particularly impressed by how students attempted silent singing internally before confidently voicing their answers. However, Ivy recognized that the lesson could have been even stronger if it had included a dedicated period for collective silent singing practice, enabling the entire class to practice and experience inner hearing simultaneously. To address this gap, she decided to allocate specific group silent-singing sessions in future lessons. Ivy concluded that nurturing the skill of inner hearing would benefit the students' overall musical and linguistic development by strengthening their auditory processing and imagination.

Teaching science last week, Nancy prepared her lesson aiming to introduce the inner hearing technique through the song “Winter, Spring and Summer, Fall” to reinforce students' recall of the four seasons. Nancy planned to begin the session by humming the melody softly, without words, allowing students to listen carefully and rehearse the song silently in their minds. This would be followed by the students singing silently to her clapping of the rhythm, then singing out loud. She anticipated the challenge of students possibly misunderstanding the silent-singing instructions, which could result in some singing aloud prematurely. However, she intended to mitigate this by clearly modeling the silent singing before asking students to perform internal singing individually. In her reflection, Nancy expressed pleasant surprise as most students successfully engaged in silent singing, accurately following her rhythmic cues without external vocalization. She noticed that the simple, familiar melody significantly aided the effectiveness of the exercise, helping students maintain concentration and confidence. Nevertheless, Nancy acknowledged that a few students still struggled with the concept, occasionally singing aloud unintentionally. She concluded that additional visual support, such as

video examples of other children engaging in inner hearing, would further clarify expectations and reinforce this skill. Nancy planned to incorporate such video resources in upcoming lessons, providing clearer models to enhance student comprehension and participation.

For her Week Eight writing lesson, Rachel planned to implement the inner hearing strategy with her class to reinforce sentence-writing conventions. She began by reviewing the key elements of writing conventions on the whiteboard, clearly highlighting concepts such as beginning sentences with a capital letter, using spaces, and applying appropriate punctuation. Rachel had previously integrated these concepts into a familiar song, creatively modifying the lyrics to reflect each writing rule explicitly. To implement the inner hearing strategy, she planned a classroom activity where one group intentionally omitted singing a lyric line when singing the song, challenging the remaining groups to identify which part was missing, thus promoting focused listening and active engagement. Rachel anticipated potential difficulties but prepared a clear visual aid by writing the modified lyrics on the whiteboard to guide her students. Reflecting on the lesson, Rachel felt satisfied that the students successfully identified the omitted lyrics, demonstrating their strong grasp of both the song and writing conventions. She noted that the activity ran smoothly and the visual lyrics greatly facilitated student responses. However, Rachel recognized that future lessons could further challenge students by removing the written lyrics, encouraging greater internalization of the song and enhancing auditory memory. Her reflection emphasized the value of combining visual, auditory, and kinesthetic elements to reinforce writing skills, planning to gradually reduce visual support to foster greater independence in future activities.

Session Nine: Debrief and Reflection

Ivy shared that her inner hearing lesson had both promising outcomes and unexpected challenges. She recalled how her pre-session plan was to have students silently observe her clear mouth movements while she "sang" without sound, with the goal of letting them internally recall the melody before joining in vocally. Ivy noted with enthusiasm that, "the video showed every child was super focused," demonstrating that when the task was framed as a game, students were genuinely engaged and attentive. However, she also expressed some regret that the planned collective silent singing phase was inadvertently omitted, which she believed would have further strengthened the internalization process. Ivy observed that while most children were able to follow the cue and quietly "sing" in their minds, a few were unable to hold back and burst into sound immediately. This observation reaffirmed her belief in the potential of inner hearing to improve focus and auditory memory. Overall, Ivy felt encouraged by the results, even though the lesson had not entirely met her expectations, and she resolved to allocate specific time for silent practice in future sessions.

Rachel expressed that integrating inner hearing into her lesson felt like a natural extension of her previous strategies, yet it presented its own set of challenges. She observed that when lyrics were provided, she would allow higher-level students to close their eyes to focus, but recognized that lower-level students might require additional support—a differentiation she found crucial. "If the lyrics are provided, I would let on-level and high-level kids close their eyes, but low-level ones might need separate lyric prompts," she noted, underscoring the need for a tiered approach to inner hearing exercises. Rachel appreciated that this method helped her class to focus on the subtle nuances of the melody, though she admitted that some children still found it challenging to internalize the rhythm without the written cues. She reflected that the series of activities had been quite successful in reinforcing both musical and language skills,

even if not every student achieved the desired level of silent recall. Moreover, Rachel shared that she would like to further experiment with removing the visual lyrics gradually to encourage more independent inner singing. Her reflections left her optimistic about refining the activity to better balance the needs of different learners while maintaining high levels of engagement and focus.

Nancy noted that her attempt to introduce inner hearing through silent humming presented mixed results, revealing both strengths and areas needing further adjustment. She observed, "After the activity started, some children—because of their natural tendencies—just couldn't help but sing out loud," which made it challenging to control the overall rhythm during the silent phase. Nancy explained that although she intended for students to focus solely on internalizing the melody, some children reacted immediately to auditory cues like clapping, making it hard to keep the exercise strictly silent. She also admitted, "I didn't really explain inner hearing because I thought it might be too complex to articulate," and instead opted for demonstration; however, this approach sometimes led to confusion among the students. Nancy reflected that even with these challenges, the activity had a high level of participation overall, and she was encouraged by the students' ability to process and recall the melody, even if imperfectly. She observed that using visual support, such as showing students how to use just mouth movements without sound, helped clarify the concept, though she acknowledged that more explicit guidance might be necessary. Nancy concluded that while the inner hearing strategy was promising, further refinements would be essential to fully harness its benefits in developing students' auditory focus and internal rehearsal skills.

Session Nine: Discussion and Implementation

During our Week 9 session, Ivy led a lively discussion on how to better implement antiphonning while reinforcing student concentration. She emphasized, "I think combining with

last week's focus on concentration—if you don't listen carefully to what the other is singing, then when they signal, you must immediately catch on," highlighting the need for immediate response to cues. Ivy elaborated that the first key is to be very familiar with the song, and the second is to be extremely focused, as she explained, "you must listen carefully and observe because others might give you a gesture at any moment, and you must catch it immediately." She noted that this design is intended to train concentration, ensuring that even a slight lapse disrupts the duet, which in turn reinforces the importance of focus. Ivy also mentioned that her goal was to create continuity with previous sessions, saying that the activity was designed "to combine with last week's emphasis on concentration to train something that helps them in class." Despite the high engagement levels observed, Ivy acknowledged that some children struggled with maintaining the required silent focus, which occasionally led to delays in their responses. This discussion underscored the necessity of clear, precise cues and a structured framework that challenges students to listen intently and respond without delay.

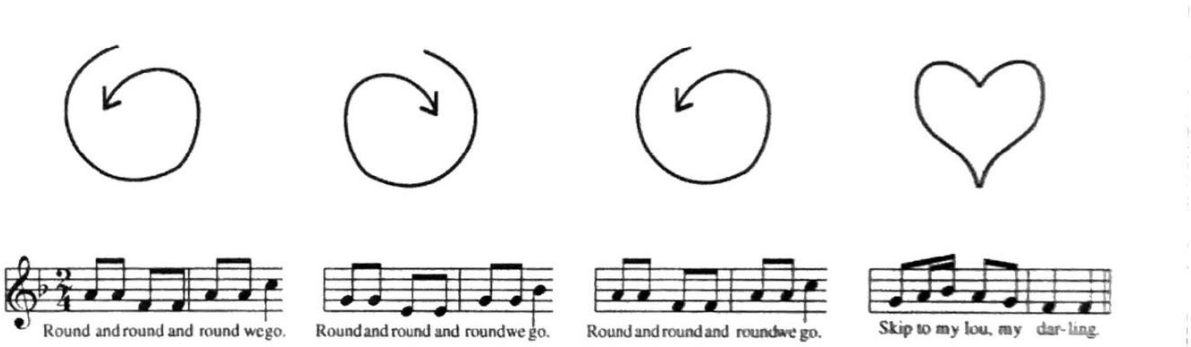
The conversation then shifted to exploring different formats of antiphonning and the role of internal auditory focus, with input from both Nancy and Rachel. Nancy remarked, "I initially understood antiphonning as just two people taking turns, but I later realized it can also work in groups or in pairs, similar to round singing," emphasizing the versatility of the strategy. She shared her observation that achieving a seamless duet requires not only familiarity with the song but also precise coordination between groups, a challenge that must be addressed by varying the activity based on student ability. Rachel expressed her interest in a version where students close their eyes to rely solely on their inner hearing, stating, "I am more interested in the approach where they only listen with their ears, but that requires them to be sufficiently familiar with the song." She added that since her class had already performed a Thanksgiving song in a public

setting, they were well-prepared to try this method. Nancy and Rachel both agreed that assigning roles and using clear hand gestures—like those used in traditional cue-passing—could help in managing transitions, ensuring that each student knows exactly when to sing. They also discussed the possibility of tailoring the activity so that higher-level students can work independently, while those needing extra support receive simplified cues or additional lyric prompts. Overall, the group concluded that with these incremental adjustments, antiphonning could effectively foster attentive listening, enhance musical responsiveness, and ultimately cultivate a more cohesive, collaborative classroom environment.

Post-Session Weekly Sharing

Session 10's reading material introduced the concept of ideographs, which is a unique, pictorial way to represent songs. An ideograph is defined as a visual symbol or pictograph that represents patterns of sound—such as phrases or song chunks—instead of individual musical notes, contrasting with conventional notation. These symbols mirror the way we hear and mentally structure music, focusing on the figural groupings of language rather than the metric divisions of a song. For example, in the provided ideographs for "Skip to My Lou," (see below) repeated phrases are represented by identical or similar symbols, while variations are indicated by slight modifications. This approach helps students "see what they hear and hear what they see," deepening their understanding of musical structure. Teachers are encouraged to engage students by having them create or modify ideographs, which promotes active listening and critical thinking about the music's form. Overall, using ideographs bridges the gap between visual and auditory learning, making abstract musical concepts accessible and interactive for young learners.

Figure 3. Skip to My Lou Ideographs



(Bennett & Bartholow, 1997, p. 102)

Session Ten

Pre-Session Individual Submissions

Last week, Ivy prepared an engaging warm-up using antiphonning for her students, intending to enhance their musical responsiveness and collaborative skills. She began by demonstrating antiphonning, carefully modeling how two singers coordinate smoothly, using clear vocal cues combined with precise hand gestures. Ivy planned to first lead a group duet herself, showing students exactly how to alternate their singing seamlessly. Next, she designed a playful, game-like activity where pairs of students would take turns singing short sections, quickly cueing each other to continue without pausing. Her goal was for each student to develop quick musical reflexes, attentive listening, and mutual responsiveness through this engaging format. In her reflection, Ivy noted that while the initial group demonstration was relatively smooth and well-received, the pair activities encountered some challenges, as students hesitated or struggled with quick transitions. She recognized that some children found it difficult to manage multiple cues simultaneously, including lyrics, timing, and gestures, leading to

inconsistent participation. To improve future lessons, Ivy wanted to provide clearer instructions and additional scaffolding, such as perhaps assigning individual parts before using gestures to switch parts, to make transitions smoother. She concluded that the duet activity had great potential to build students' musical confidence, coordination, and attentiveness if supported with structured guidance.

Nancy planned her lesson focusing on developing expressive singing through a call-and-response voice game using varied vocal qualities. To begin, Nancy intended to introduce a song linked to their Language Arts theme, encouraging students to listen carefully and familiarize themselves with its lyrics and melody. She prepared to demonstrate different voice qualities—such as those of a mother, sister, or brother—to highlight the expressive possibilities of the song. Students were expected to imitate these vocal variations through an engaging call-and-response format, alternating between Nancy's prompts and the students' responses. Despite her careful planning, Nancy recognized in her reflection that the students found the voice imitation game challenging, likely due to insufficient initial modeling and scaffolding. She observed students actively listening and singing along confidently at first but struggling when required to switch between distinct vocal qualities spontaneously. She reflected that the activity's complexity likely required more gradual and explicit preparation, possibly beginning with simpler or more familiar songs. Nancy resolved to incorporate additional scaffolding in future lessons, providing clearer modeling or simpler vocal examples to ensure students could engage successfully. Overall, she saw this approach as valuable for enhancing students' vocal expression, active listening skills, and musical interpretation, if adjusted properly to their ability levels.

For Week Nine, Rachel introduced a creative antiphonning strategy in her lesson, integrating auditory attention and hand gestures to facilitate cooperative singing. Her intention

was to use specific gestures to cue students to alternately sing parts of a familiar Thanksgiving-themed song, reinforcing their musical memory and auditory skills. She initially planned to have students divided by gender, singing with their eyes closed, which would require intense concentration and listening, prompting students to rely solely on auditory cues rather than visual ones. Rachel anticipated the possibility that a full-group approach might prove challenging, and was prepared to shift to paired activities if necessary. During her reflection, Rachel observed that while some students enthusiastically participated, many others stayed on the periphery, either reluctant or hesitant to engage actively. She noted that a few high-level students dominated interactions, repeatedly participating and inadvertently excluding others. Rachel recognized the need to adjust the activity structure, perhaps by having students who already participated sit down or squat, ensuring everyone had an equal chance to engage actively. Moving forward, she planned to provide additional auditory cues or reintroduce the song to support students who struggled initially.

Session Ten: Debrief and Reflection

Reflecting on her antiphonning lesson, Ivy felt both encouraged by the engagement and aware of some areas needing improvement. She recalled how she had designed the activity to enhance musical responsiveness by demonstrating antiphonning with clear hand gestures and vocal cues, yet noted that the transition for students to take over these gestures was not as smooth as planned. “The logic is that singing and language are connected—when a child has to construct the song on their own, it becomes truly their own creation,” she explained, emphasizing that each student needs to build the musical line from scratch rather than merely mimicking what they see. Ivy observed that while most students were highly focused, a few struggled with managing multiple cues at once; their responses were sometimes too hasty or out of sync, which disrupted

the intended flow. She recognized that her demonstration of gestures worked well when she led, but when students were asked to perform independently, confusion ensued. Determined to improve, she resolved to incorporate more explicit instructions and a gradual scaffolding process in future lessons to help every child manage the timing and transitions effectively.

Rachel shared a reflective and critical perspective on her implementation of the antiphonning strategy, noting that the activity had moments of high energy yet also revealed some participation imbalances. She observed that the exercise sometimes devolved into a game resembling "musical chairs," where a few students dominated the performance while others remained on the periphery. "There's a problem," she noted, "the activity ended up with only about five or six kids participating actively, while the rest were less involved," indicating that the structured alternation was not evenly maintained. Rachel reflected on the difficulty of managing multiple cues—lyrics, timing, and hand gestures—that sometimes caused delays in switching parts; as she explained, "When it comes to switching parts, they can't recall the lyrics unless they sing it themselves." She suggested that future iterations should include a system where, once a student has participated, they either sit down or squat to allow others to join, ensuring more balanced involvement.

Nancy reflected on her antiphonning lesson by noting both the strengths and the challenges of the approach. She explained that while her clear, deliberate hand gestures initially provided a strong guide—ensuring that the students knew which part they were supposed to sing—problems arose when she invited the children to take over the gestures themselves. Nancy observed that, "When the students had to manage their own cues, their hands were all over the place," indicating that many struggled to coordinate their actions and maintain the rhythm. She pointed out that this lack of coordination often resulted in delays during transitions, as some

children became confused about when to start and when to stop. Nancy acknowledged that while her demonstration had been effective, the task of simultaneously managing multiple elements—such as knowing where to place their hands while staying attentive to the singing—proved overwhelming for many of the students. She expressed concern that the complexity of the activity might be too high for some learners, suggesting that the sequence needed to be broken down into simpler, more manageable steps. Nancy concluded that although antiphonning showed significant promise for enhancing musical responsiveness and collaborative skills, the exercise must be scaffolded more carefully, ensuring that every child can participate effectively without being overwhelmed by the simultaneous demands on their attention and motor coordination.

Session Ten: Discussion and Implementation

Ivy began the discussion by explaining her creative vision for using ideographs in class, stating,

> "I envisioned it would be really fun. First, when designing, I would introduce what an ideograph is, then guide the children to sing according to the ideograph, then as a second step let them use their bodies to change that ideograph, and finally, with the same song, each child gets a piece of paper to create their own ideograph. I believe this trains their creativity."

She elaborated that her revised design was based on past experiences and broke the task into three clear segments. First, she would present a model ideograph with a clear demonstration so that every student recognized the symbol and could follow along with the song. Next, she planned to encourage the students to use their bodies to transform the ideograph—asking them, "What movement would you use to represent the lyrics?"—and have the rest of the class mimic that action while singing the corresponding line. Ivy emphasized that the goal was to build a

bridge between the familiar song and their own creative expression, noting that the process allows each child to construct the meaning from scratch. “So, I use a symbol to mean ‘whatever you understand, you draw that symbol,’” she added, underscoring that the representation is entirely personal and reflects their individual interpretation.

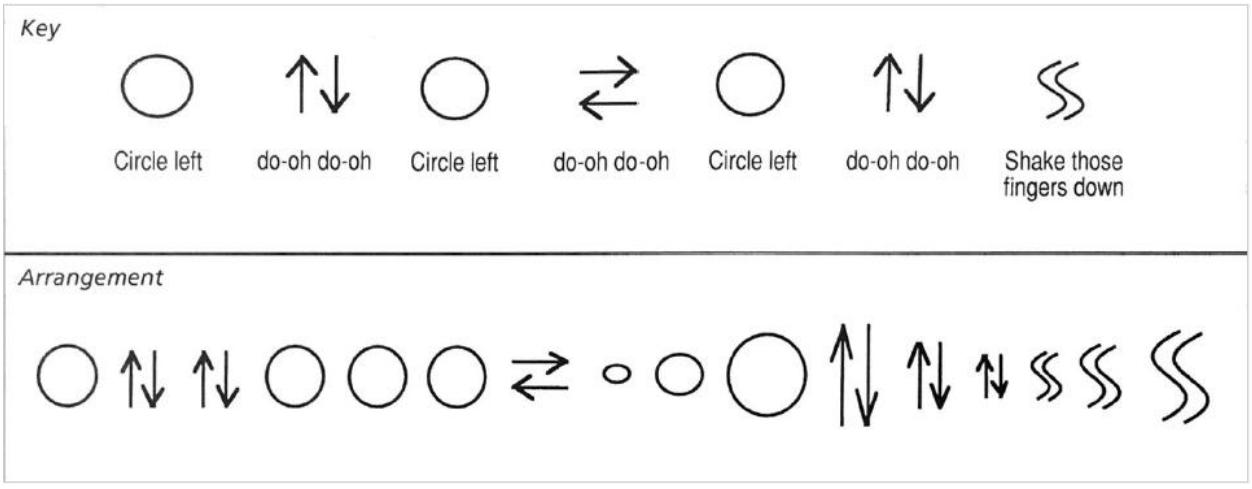
Rachel and Nancy also contributed their insights, deepening the discussion on how to refine the ideograph strategy. Rachel observed that while the concept was promising, she noticed that the children’s actual understanding sometimes deviated from the intended design, and adjustments were needed to ensure full participation. “I think it would be more fun if, after those initial steps, when the children fully grasp what an ideograph is, we sing the song again and then let them design their own ideographs to boost their creativity,” she remarked. She also stressed that every student should have the opportunity to participate, rather than only the more naturally engaged ones. Nancy agreed and highlighted the necessity of clear, gradual scaffolding, likening the process to building a bridge or a scaffold that connects the children’s prior knowledge with new musical concepts. I mentioned to the teachers that I believed this is a developmentally appropriate way to notate music for young children, as it transforms abstract musical notation into concrete visual and kinesthetic elements. Together, we concluded that these incremental adjustments would not only enhance musical responsiveness but also enrich language learning, ensuring that every child can internalize and express the relationship between the song’s lyrics and their corresponding symbolic representation.

Post-Session Weekly Sharing

Session 11’s reading material, titled “Ideograph (Part Two: Rearranging Ideographs),” built on the concept of ideographs by inviting students to creatively manipulate and reorder the pictorial symbols that represent song phrases. Rearranging ideographs involves taking the

established symbols—each corresponding to a specific musical phrase or unit—and reorganizing them to form new arrangements of a song (see example below). This process encourages students to engage in active composition, as they must think critically about the structure and flow of the music while experimenting with different orders of the symbols. By creating their own arrangements, students gain a deeper understanding of how musical phrases interact, which enhances both their reading and performance skills. The material highlighted that this activity not only reinforces their ability to read the ideograph but also promotes creative writing and collaborative problem-solving. In addition, students are challenged to incorporate dynamic variations—such as changes in volume indicated by adjustments in the size of the symbols—into their arrangements. Rearranging ideographs helps students internalize musical structures, refine their inner hearing, and express their musical ideas in an innovative, engaging way.

Figure 4. Circle Left Ideographs Rearrangement



(Bennett & Bartholomew, 1997, p. 106)

Session 11

Pre-Session Individual Submissions

Ivy prepared a lesson for her students using a strategy involving ideographs, aiming to introduce musical concepts in a visual and creative manner. She intended to start the lesson by displaying ideographs representing different parts of a familiar song, guiding the students to interpret these visual symbols as musical instructions. Ivy planned for the children to initially follow along by singing and using gestures or body movements that aligned with the displayed ideographs. She envisioned gradually transitioning to an activity where students would independently create their own ideographs, fostering their creative expression and deeper musical understanding. During her reflection afterward, Ivy noted with excitement that students quickly understood the concept of ideographs, readily associating the symbols with the corresponding musical phrases and movements. She was particularly delighted when children enthusiastically engaged in creating their own unique ideographs, displaying creativity and ownership of their musical learning. Ivy also observed that students easily recognized songs represented by their peers' ideographs, making the session highly interactive and enjoyable. Ivy concluded that using ideographs effectively bridged auditory, visual, and kinesthetic learning, supporting comprehensive musical understanding and active participation.

For last week, Nancy planned to use ideographs in her digraph word review lesson, aiming to visually reinforce students' understanding and retention of digraph sounds. Nancy designed the lesson to begin with the display of ideographs, which in her case were represented by words, that visually represented segments of a song previously learned in class. She intended for the students to initially guess the song based solely on these ideographs, using their prior knowledge and visual reasoning skills. Following the guessing phase, she planned to have small

groups randomly choose an ideograph to guide their singing, fostering teamwork and collective participation. In her reflection, Nancy observed that while the students showed considerable interest and enthusiasm, some struggled initially with accurately matching the melody to the visuals. Recognizing a logistical challenge, Nancy adjusted the classroom seating arrangement into a circle, significantly improving group concentration and visual focus. Despite the increased concentration, she noted a few students required peer encouragement to actively participate in singing. Nancy concluded that the ideograph approach effectively engaged students' visual and auditory skills, though she recognized that refining the aesthetic appeal and clarity of ideographs would enhance future participation and understanding.

In Week 10, Rachel's lesson planning incorporated ideographs combined with a secret song approach to reinforce students' recall and understanding of directional vocabulary within a physical science context. Rachel planned to start by displaying ideographs representing distinct song segments, inviting students to use visual cues to guess the song's theme and lyrics. Once the song was identified, she intended for students to collectively sing the entire song guided by these ideographic representations. Rachel anticipated that interpreting visual symbols might initially prove challenging for students, planning to provide auditory cues if necessary. Her reflection captured both enthusiasm and insightful observations—most students successfully identified the ideographs quickly, although one symbol, representing "turn around," was consistently misinterpreted as "circular," highlighting the subtlety of visual representation and students' interpretations. She felt particularly encouraged when students like Bobo and Bobby quickly and accurately interpreted certain ideographs, setting a positive tone for class engagement. Rachel acknowledged a moderate level of participation during the guessing phase but observed significantly increased enthusiasm during collective singing. She reflected positively on the use

of visual aids, noting their effectiveness in enhancing students' musical recall and conceptual understanding. In future lessons, Rachel planned to improve ideographic clarity, particularly for challenging concepts like "turn around," ensuring that visual representations would align more clearly with intended meanings and further deepen student engagement.

Session 11: Debrief and Reflection

Ivy reflected that her ideograph lesson was both enlightening and full of surprises. She shared, “I never expected that what I drew, they couldn’t guess—it was as if I couldn’t even guess what they created, yet they all managed to sing together very quickly,” which left her both amused and impressed by the children’s spontaneous creativity. She noted that her strategy of linking visual symbols to a familiar song allowed the students to construct the musical line in their own way, and she emphasized the connection between singing and language by stating, “The idea is that when a child has to say a sentence and sing a song, it feels the same—they must construct it from scratch in their own way; no matter how others do it, it won’t work for me because it isn’t my own creation.” Ivy observed that although many students grasped the concept quickly, there were moments when the ideographs were too abstract, and the children struggled with matching them to the correct parts of the song. She realized that lowering the difficulty by linking the ideographs more closely to the lyrics made a significant difference in their comprehension. Ivy also recognized the importance of clear demonstrations, which enabled the students to confidently repeat and even create their own symbols.

Rachel expressed that integrating ideographs into her lesson provided a far more effective approach than simply supplying lyrics, especially given her class’s young age. “I think it’s better than just giving them lyrics because my class can accept something more concrete,” she noted, emphasizing the need for tactile, visual cues in her teaching. She explained that by allowing the

children to interpret a symbol in their own way— “so you can use a symbol to mean whatever you understand, just draw the symbol however you interpret it”—she helped them create a personal connection with the music. Rachel recalled moments of surprise when, after being shown a random ideograph (like one depicting a ‘nose’), a student quickly guessed “sun,” which was in the title of the song which contained the word ‘nose’ in its lyrics, indicating that even unexpected symbols could spark immediate recognition. However, she also observed that some symbols, especially those representing complex cues such as “turn around,” were misinterpreted, leading to confusion during the singing exercise. Rachel felt that the key to success was ensuring that the ideographs were closely tied to the lyrics, thus making the connection between the visual and the auditory more direct. She resolved to refine the clarity of these symbols in future lessons, believing that incremental adjustments would ultimately boost both participation and musical recall.

Nancy reflected on her ideograph lesson for the digraph word review with a mixture of satisfaction and a critical eye for improvement. She recalled how, during the introduction of the song, she purposefully avoided stating the song directly and instead played with its rhythm—resulting in some students responding with “number four,” which was another song that shared the same rhythmic (and melodic) patterns. Although this unexpected outcome left her momentarily puzzled, she was ultimately pleased that most students were able to guess the song correctly, remarking that she was “really surprised because they almost all managed to identify the song.” Nancy recognized that the issue lay in the clarity of the visual symbols; some students needed more precise guidance to match the melody and rhythm correctly. She observed that without sufficient scaffolding, the ideographs sometimes failed to convey the intended meaning, leading to misinterpretations during the group activity. Determined to overcome these

challenges, Nancy resolved to redesign her visual aids so that each ideograph would be more clearly associated with its corresponding musical phrase. In her view, providing additional structured support would ensure that every student could participate effectively, thereby transforming the lesson into an even more powerful tool for reinforcing both auditory and visual learning.

Session 11: Discussion and Implementation

During the session, the group discussed how to optimize the use of ideographs to bridge music and language learning, focusing on rearranging ideographs. I emphasized that the process of creating and then rearranging ideographs encourages students to actively "see" the music as well as "hear" it, which is crucial for internalizing song structure. I also pointed out that by allowing students to choose and modify symbols based on their understanding, the activity fosters a constructivist learning environment where learners build knowledge from their own experiences. The discussion revealed that while most students were excited by the task last week, some encountered difficulties and that these issues could be mitigated through clearer, incremental instructions. Teachers agreed that this approach not only supports musical responsiveness but also enhances language comprehension by linking visual symbols with lyrical meaning. They suggested that future sessions should incorporate structured cueing and scaffolding, gradually encouraging students to rely more on their internal auditory memory without extensive visual prompts.

Our conversation gradually shifted to the topic of creativity. I suggested that fostering creativity requires having the right medium to guide students—especially because children often see things in ways we might never anticipate. "Yes," Nancy agreed, "their perspectives can be drastically different from our assumptions, and that gap reveals how powerful their imaginations

can be." Rachel noted that to nurture such creativity, teachers must thoughtfully design activities that let children freely explore their ideas: "Once they feel acknowledged, they're eager to develop their abilities." Ivy added that in an exam-oriented context, creativity is frequently stifled, so providing room for open-ended innovation is crucial. We also acknowledged that teachers, too, must keep learning new methods; otherwise, what seems like "innovation" can become rigid and lose meaning. The teachers agreed that by choosing a medium that naturally resonates with young learners—such as music and movement—we can seamlessly fuse enjoyment with instruction, ensuring that creativity flourishes alongside academic goals.

Post-Session Weekly Sharing

For next week, the final week of the teacher study group, Session 12's reading material, titled "Teaching with Creativity," explored the concept of teaching creatively and locating creativity in the act of teaching itself rather than in the subject matter or as an outcome. It introduced the idea that creative teaching, or teaching with creativity, requires a specialized blend of subject knowledge and innovative pedagogical strategies, a combination referred to as Creative Pedagogical Domain Knowledge (CPDK). The text argues that teachers who model creative behaviors—such as risk-taking, flexibility, and open-mindedness—can foster a classroom environment that encourages students to take intellectual risks and embrace uncertainty. It likened creative teaching to "disciplined improvisation," where prepared knowledge meets spontaneous, emergent actions during the teaching process. Moreover, the material discussed the challenges of measuring teaching with creativity, noting that its dynamic nature calls for innovative assessment methods like experience sampling and trajectory mapping. Ultimately, teaching with creativity was presented as a multifaceted practice that not only

supports student creativity but also enhances overall teaching effectiveness by merging structured expertise with imaginative, moment-to-moment instructional decisions.

Session 12

Pre-Session Individual Submissions

Ivy aimed to introduce her class to the creative process of using ideographs for musical arrangement, building upon the foundation established in previous sessions. She planned to begin the lesson by displaying clear, teacher-designed ideograph symbols during the warm-up, modeling how these symbols could represent different segments of a familiar song. Ivy's goal was for the children first to follow along by singing and using accompanying movements as guided by these visuals. She then envisioned an interactive session in which students would rearrange and recombine these ideographs to create unique song arrangements collaboratively. Ultimately, Ivy intended the students to develop their own ideographs, encouraging personal expression and ownership of their musical learning. Reflecting afterward, Ivy was thrilled to see students quickly grasp the activity's purpose, enthusiastically creating their own ideographs and confidently presenting their rearrangements to classmates. She observed with pleasure that the step-by-step demonstration clearly facilitated understanding and engagement among all the children. Remarkably, many students eagerly volunteered to demonstrate their creative arrangements, inviting peers to join in singing their uniquely arranged songs. Ivy concluded that detailed guidance combined with room for creative expression greatly enhanced the effectiveness of this visual-musical strategy, encouraging her to further integrate and refine ideograph use in future lessons.

Nancy prepared her lesson to introduce vowel digraphs using ideograph arrangement as a creative visual performance cue for her class. She planned the lesson to begin with a group

singing activity, presenting a digraph-focused song accompanied by her pre-designed ideographs. Her intention was for students to clearly see and respond to these visual cues, singing softly or loudly according to the size and presentation of each ideograph symbol. Anticipating some challenges, Nancy was concerned that students might find it difficult to create their own ideographs or correctly interpret the dynamic cues. During her reflection, Nancy noted that while students eagerly engaged with the teacher-provided symbols, enthusiastically adjusting their vocal volume, they struggled significantly when asked to create their own ideographs independently. Recognizing this challenge, Nancy questioned whether the concept might have been too abstract or if her initial explanations and demonstrations were insufficiently clear. She decided that providing a wider variety of ideograph examples, perhaps sourced from digital tools or online resources, could enhance students' understanding in future lessons. Nancy also reflected on the possible necessity of explaining the process in Chinese for clearer comprehension. However, she remained confident that once effectively scaffolded, ideographs could significantly enhance the students' expressive abilities and deepen their musical understanding.

For Week 11, Rachel prepared an activity using the ideograph strategy combined with the secret song method to review writing conventions with her class. Rachel planned to begin her lesson by showing visual ideographs representing segments of the familiar "Writing Convention Song," prompting the students to guess the song based on these visual clues. After correctly identifying the song, the students would sing together as a class, guided by the displayed ideographs. Next, Rachel planned an interactive activity where students, divided into small groups, would individually create unique ideographs to represent different parts of the song. She anticipated some students might require simplified versions or extra support, providing an option

of smaller or larger ideographs as needed. Reflecting on the implementation, Rachel observed initial confusion, as several children produced identical ideographs due to overly influential teacher demonstrations. Despite this, she noticed the students enjoyed the rearranging process, even though transitions between different parts of the song were initially slower than expected. Rachel felt encouraged that every child participated actively, largely thanks to the clear labeling and group numbering system she introduced. For future adjustments, Rachel decided to offer fewer explicit examples to allow students more creative freedom, thereby encouraging original and diverse ideograph creations. She concluded by affirming that this approach effectively reinforced both students' musical recall and writing convention understanding through visually stimulating, cooperative, and engaging activities.

Session 12: Debrief and Reflection

Ivy shared that her ideograph lesson extended far longer than she initially anticipated, remarking, “I never expected it to be this long,” as she found herself pleasantly surprised by the depth of engagement that unfolded. She explained that the consistent structure of previous sessions had given the children a preliminary understanding of ideographs, so when she introduced the new concept, they immediately grasped its meaning. After demonstrating a clear example, the students eagerly began to create their own ideographs, and Ivy observed that participation reached a new high; every child was excited to raise their hand and showcase their unique creation. She noted that the activity involved splitting the song into segments, where each segment was represented by a distinct ideograph, and the children were then invited to rearrange these symbols to form new song arrangements. Ivy recalled with enthusiasm that “each child wanted to display their self-created song,” which underscored the effectiveness of blending visual cues with musical performance. Although time constraints forced her to cancel part of the

session, she was encouraged by the collective creative spirit and the way students could quickly adapt and innovate. Ivy concluded that detailed guidance coupled with opportunities for independent creative expression was key to enhancing both musical and linguistic understanding in her class.

Rachel described how she introduced a spontaneous numbering system during her ideograph lesson to ensure every student had a chance to participate, stating, “I suddenly thought that numbering might be a better idea, because I was worried about a few children dominating the activity.” She explained that by assigning numbers to each group, she prevented the common issue where only a handful of students take center stage while others remain on the sidelines. Rachel observed that once the children grasped the connection between the ideographs and the song’s lyrics, they were quick to engage and even reconfigure the symbols on the spot. She acknowledged that while the activity was engaging and fun, a few students still struggled with aligning the ideographs to the correct song segments. She also recognized that further refinements—such as giving less prescriptive examples—could encourage greater originality in their designs. Overall, she was pleased that her method fostered a collaborative environment where students could both interpret and reimagine musical cues, thus reinforcing their understanding of the song’s structure.

Nancy reflected on her ideograph lesson with a critical yet optimistic perspective, noting that her initial demonstration of ideographs might have inadvertently restricted her students’ creative potential. She observed, “At first, my demo seemed to limit their own creative expression, as many ended up drawing nearly identical symbols,” which made her realize that some children struggled to break away from her example. Nancy recalled that while a portion of the class quickly understood the concept and produced innovative designs, others appeared

confused and uncertain about how to proceed independently. She recognized that the difficulty lay in the abstract nature of the symbols and the need for clearer, more gradual scaffolding. In her view, the activity should have been broken down into smaller, more manageable steps to help every child understand the purpose of the ideographs and how they relate to the song. To remedy this, Nancy resolved to incorporate more diverse examples—possibly using digital tools for visual inspiration—and to explain the process more explicitly, even in Chinese if necessary, to accommodate varying levels of comprehension. She concluded that, despite the challenges, the lesson revealed the immense potential of using ideographs as a bridge between auditory and visual learning, affirming that a well-designed scaffold can unlock students' creativity and enhance their overall musical and linguistic development.

Session 12: Discussion and Conclusion

During Week 12, the group's conversation deepened around the role of creativity in music and teaching, and its seamless integration with academic objectives. Ivy noted,

> "For me, it isn't really about making trade-offs. Creative teaching is all about designing engaging activities that stimulate children's own ideas. You might design creative activities based on your teaching objectives—and it really depends on the teacher. With proper guidance, you will receive the necessary feedback. It's not like choosing creativity means you can't achieve your teaching goals. They can actually go hand in hand. Of course, if you have the energy, you might design every part of your lesson in a more creative way to spark children's imagination. But even if you only design a few parts creatively due to time constraints, there is no conflict between creative design and achieving your teaching objectives."

Rachel shared her insight, “Learning English creatively through singing and play not only makes it fun but also helps improve students’ listening skills because they have to quickly respond. They don’t feel like they are just learning English in a boring, rote way.” Nancy also added, “When I gradually added musical elements like for example for the seasons into my classes—using songs and visual displays—the students learned the names of the seasons very clearly after just one or two sessions.”

In conclusion, the teachers believed that the 12 weeks of teacher study group reinforced the vision and value of educators coming together to engage in creative teaching practices through the incorporation of music and movement. As Ivy observed,

> “Collaborative discussions in our study group are a very important platform for creative teaching. No matter how creative you might be on your own, if you don’t absorb others’ ideas or at least observe how others do it, it’s hard to have a solid standard to measure your creativity. You may think your idea is new, but it might already be common elsewhere.”

Rachel admitted during the study group that she had never considered music as a teaching tool until her participation in the program helped her realize its value: “My participation in the study group was essential in introducing music to my teaching practices, which I would not have considered before.” As the facilitator, I posed one final question to the group: for everyone in this group, has music truly enhanced our teaching methods and served as a dynamic force in our lessons? Without hesitation, the educators responded with a convincing “Yes!”

Chapter 5: Shifts in Practice, Engagement, and Identity

This chapter presents the findings from a 12-week Teacher Study Group (TSG) in which three Chinese early childhood educators—Ivy, Rachel, and Nancy (pseudonyms)—collaboratively explored integrating music and movement into their English teaching practice. Based on narratives from Chapter 4, three findings emerged that give shape to a situated and contextual understanding of teacher professional growth and the creative transformation of classroom practice at a particular time and place. First, teacher learning was revealed to be non-linear: early hesitations and iterative experiments did not signal failure but instead laid what I believe is "essential" groundwork for creative breakthroughs. Second, student engagement emerged as a core measure of teaching effectiveness, and professional growth. Rather than relying solely on traditional outcome metrics, teachers came to recognize that real-time, observable student responses—ranging from enthusiastic participation to spontaneous leadership—provide the most compelling evidence of innovative instructional practices. Third, through participation in the Teacher Study Group, educators experienced a fundamental shift in their professional identity, evolving into creative, adaptive practitioners who blend subject knowledge with imaginative pedagogical strategies. Together, these findings not only challenge linear views of teacher development and identity and the kinds of rigid objectives that mistake achievement with learning, but also invite us to reimagine professional development as a dynamic and fluid process marked by collaboration, reflection, and continuous refinement.

Finding 1: Non-Linear Learning as a (Post)Foundational Perspective

This section explores the non-linear nature of teacher learning, where progress does not follow a smooth, predictable trajectory but rather unfolds in fits and starts, marked by early hesitations, iterative improvements and setbacks, and unexpected breakthroughs. In the study

group, teachers wrestled with the challenges of integrating creative, music-based pedagogical strategies into a curriculum traditionally "anchored" in rote methods. Their initial reluctance—rooted in doubts about the efficacy and feasibility of such new approaches—served as the precursor to a deeper, more reflective process of trial, error, and adaptive change. Through discussions of setbacks and moments of "aha" as the teachers gradually reimagined their practices, this section demonstrates that non-linear progress is not a detour from success but a "foundational" element—dare I say post-foundational—of sustainable professional growth and pedagogical evolution.

Early Hesitations and the Build-Up to Breakthroughs

In my opinion, Ivy, Rachel, and Nancy's early hesitations stemmed from a perceived mismatch between playful, music-based strategies and a rigid, expectation-heavy curriculum. In Session Two, Nancy admitted, "I didn't use the song in my class last week, so there's nothing to show yet," reflecting her uncertainty about adopting a creative approach to a new topic. This hesitation likely highlighted the emotional toll of leaving behind familiar procedures and trusting that innovative methods could still deliver academic results. Meanwhile, Rachel confessed she had "failed to make an attempt using music and movement," which underscored how conceptual or cognitive acceptance of a new technique does not always translate into immediate classroom experimentation, especially when dealing with an internal struggle between theoretical acceptance of creative methods and actual classroom practice. For each of these moments, I recognized that the teachers were not simply procrastinating but rather wrestling with their doubts about feasibility and effectiveness. By discussing their hesitations openly, they validated the idea that the adoption of new methods rarely unfolds seamlessly, especially in contexts where teacher responsibilities and curricular demands feel unyielding and the outcome is result-driven.

The unanticipated slow starts and pauses eventually became significant precursors to later successes, suggesting that even perceived "delays" can be "foundational" checkpoints along the non-linear path of professional growth.

Over time, these hesitant beginnings gave way to incremental progress that, taken cumulatively, would yield the more dramatic breakthroughs documented later in Chapter 4. For instance, Ivy's attempt to integrate music into a lesson on directional words initially met with passivity from students, prompting her to reevaluate the complexity of her instruction. "The lesson I gave seemed smooth at first," she later reflected, "but some children were just watching, not following what I instructed." Had she not encountered those less-successful moments early on, I believe she might never have questioned her "familiar" teaching methods and how to calibrate songs or gestures to students' readiness levels. Nancy's doubts about whether "crazy" or "imaginative" lyrics suited her tightly defined curriculum also nudged her to explore how playful songs like "Down by the Bay" could be adapted for language comprehension. Rachel's reluctance to try music eventually shifted once she recognized how skipping a new technique deprived her classroom of potentially richer, more interactive learning. In each case, these early challenges, though inconvenient or discouraging at the time, proved to be steppingstones—sometimes slippery—that sharpened the teachers' sensitivity to pacing, scaffolding, and emotional readiness. Thus, what initially looked like stalling, rejection, or uncreative teaching functioned, in reality, as part of a larger cycle of reflection, recalibration, and renewed attempts.

Critical Incidents and the Role of "Aha" Moments

Among the incidents in Chapter 4 that illustrate the spontaneous nature of learning breakthroughs, Rachel's experience with skip-counting in week four remains especially striking. Initially concerned that her students might not recall the melody, she introduced a short warm-up

song to jog their memories, feeling more than a little uncertain about her own singing ability. To Rachel's surprise, one child not only recognized the tune but also began singing it aloud, instantly drawing in the rest of the class. This abrupt turn—from wary silence to energetic group participation—demonstrated how "hidden" or unperceived learning can burst forth when provided with even a modest prompt. Reflecting on the event, Rachel realized her hesitation had nearly prevented her from attempting a potentially engaging activity in the first place. "Frankly, I don't think I'm very good at singing," she had admitted before the session, but by persisting despite her doubts, she witnessed how a seemingly small spark could trigger a much larger wave of understanding and enthusiasm in her classroom.

Nancy's notable "aha" moment unfolded when she used a "secret song" strategy to reinforce the silent E rule, originally worrying that complicated lyrics and an unfamiliar rhythm might alienate her students. In week five, she began the lesson with a rhythmic introduction—clapping to help students recall a melody tied to silent E—yet remained convinced that the song's complexity could stymie participation. "I assumed they'd catch on quickly," she reflected, "but I kept thinking, what if they can't remember the words?" As we observed in her video, to her astonishment, a few children quickly guessed the song based solely on those initial rhythmic clues, leading the rest of the class to join in almost immediately. Watching how a small group's confident recognition blossomed into class-wide engagement, Nancy realized that her students were more adaptable than she had given them credit for (as was she!). Far from confusing them, the challenge of matching lyrics to spelling rules actually piqued their curiosity, sparking multiple hands-on attempts to sing along and decode meaning. This incident reframed Nancy's belief that new phonics concepts had to be introduced in mechanical ways; instead, she discovered how musical cues could light up her learners' enthusiasm for language learning. The

swift pivot from skepticism to genuine excitement captured exactly why "aha" moments matter so much: they remind teachers that unforeseen leaps in comprehension can arise when both teacher and students remain open to playfulness, complexity, and creative risk-taking.

Significance of Scaffolding in Emergent Learning

While these critical incidents may appear spontaneous, they were "anchored" in systematic supports that prevented teachers and students alike from being overwhelmed by novelty. Across multiple sessions, the group recognized that complex methods—such as "chinning" or "antiphonning"—could lead to confusion unless introduced in carefully planned increments. Ivy, in Session Four, realized that her directional lesson needed to be "more digestible," especially when children did not respond to her initial demonstration. Nancy similarly saw in Session Ten that handing over full responsibility for antiphonning cues too soon caused chaos, as "their hands were all over the place," illustrating how scaffolding could spell the difference between engagement and frustration. These realizations underscored the principle that scaffolding is far from a mere classroom management tool: it is a deliberate strategy that segments new activities into smaller, more manageable steps. Teachers could sustain momentum through this segmentation and address confusion before it hardened into defeat or disengagement. Moreover, the teachers discovered that scaffolding for themselves—via peer discussions, reflection journals, and video reviews—helped them refine lessons iteratively rather than scrapping a method at the first sign of trouble.

Equally important was that scaffolding applied not just to discrete tasks but also to teachers' evolving mindsets regarding creativity and structure. Ivy, for example, found it beneficial to try out minimal versions of a new song—limiting the complexity of directions or gestures—before gradually adding layers, a process that gave her the confidence to persist even

if early attempts fell flat. Nancy relied heavily on the group's feedback to pinpoint which elements of her lessons needed a gentler introduction, such as realizing that pre-teaching vocabulary like "east" and "west" before embedding them in a movement-based song could enhance understanding and engagement. "I learned that even skipping a single step could leave some kids behind," she noted. By coupling these incremental strategies with ongoing group reflections, the teachers created an environment where experimentation was safe, and "failures" could be reframed as cues for re-engineering a lesson strategy. Over time, they realized that scaffolding generated a type of "safety net" for risk-taking, both for them and their students—a net that enabled consistent forward movement despite frequent detours. Each teacher's growth hinged on the recognition that even the best ideas require a supportive framework, ensuring that learners gradually build competence and confidence rather than facing unscaffolded demands. In this way, scaffolding served as the backbone of the non-linear progression observed throughout Chapter 4.

Fluctuations in Teacher Confidence and Practice

The teachers' confidence levels rose and fell in direct relation to these staggered, and sometimes messy, experiences of implementing music-infused strategies. As mentioned earlier, Rachel openly admitted in Session Five, "Frankly, I don't think I'm very good at singing," capturing how personal insecurities may impede educators from embracing creative methods. Initially, this self-doubt prevented her from committing fully to rhythmic or melodic activities, but seeing her students respond enthusiastically to a skip-counting melody transformed her outlook. Meanwhile, Nancy's repeated attempts at chanting activities, including a rhythm-based relay in Session Seven's planning, often ended in abrupt pivots when students' timing issues made the lesson, in her eyes, unsuccessful. "The lesson didn't go as planned," she commented,

illustrating how optimism can quickly wane when difficulties arise. While such moments could easily deflate a teacher's morale, through our group discussion, Nancy came to see them as signals that her approach needed "tinkering" rather than outright abandonment.

Over the course of the study, these fluctuations and tinkering became almost cyclical: one week, a teacher would feel reinvigorated by a playful, high-engagement lesson; the next, she might face confusion or partial disengagement that triggered renewed doubt. Rather than concealing these mood shifts, the teacher study group created a safe space for candid self-assessments, normalizing the non-linear path of professional development. Rachel realized that her fear of singing was "less about inability and more about self-perception," which helped her gradually set aside inhibitions with the group's encouragement. Nancy similarly recognized that failing mid-lesson could lead to an innovative revision for the following week, effectively viewing each disappointment as a reference for improving future attempts. Such reflections reframed emotional lows not as endpoints but as steppingstones (however slippery!), a reframing that allowed teachers to persist with novel ideas despite momentary lapses in confidence. Ultimately, the group came to accept that doubt, confusion, and excitement would perpetually co-exist in their evolving practice, each playing a vital role in shaping their trajectory.

Teachers' Evolving Focus: From Rote to Creative

One of the more profound shifts documented in Chapter 4 is how the teachers gradually transitioned from outcome-focused, often rote-based instruction to more creative, student-centered methods. Initially, Nancy and Ivy struggled to incorporate music, movement, and playful lyrical content into their established lesson-planning routines, which often emphasized memorization or direct skill practice. Rachel's hesitation in implementing new ideas also highlighted how the educators relied on traditional norms that hinged on teacher-directed talk

and teacher-led exercises. However, as they gradually implemented strategies such as secret songs, inner hearing, and ideographs, the teachers discovered fresh avenues for fostering engagement and meaning-making. They noticed children responding with heightened focus and spontaneous collaboration, a stark contrast to the passivity sometimes observed in teacher-centered lessons, as students sat "properly" in their chairs. Over time, these experiments chipped away at the teachers' deeply ingrained assumptions about "serious" learning, revealing that playful creativity could bolster rather than undermine academic rigor. "We were surprised how a seemingly silly song could result in deeper focus," Ivy noted, underscoring how prior biases about "fun vs. academic" dissolved.

Of course, this evolution did not happen uniformly or without missteps; each teacher encountered moments where stepping outside their comfort zone felt risky or impractical. Nancy once questioned how "crazy" lyrics could possibly be used to fulfill curriculum standards, only to see her students' sense of wonder somehow translated into deeper vocabulary retention. Ivy, too, recognized that while a purely rote approach might keep lessons predictable and structured, it more often than not offered limited opportunities for joyful discovery—a point driven home when she witnessed the children's enthusiasm for movement-based direction songs. Rachel, perhaps the most apprehensive about musical performance, saw her confidence expand each time she realized that a playful tune or a short chant could spark engagement across ability levels. These experiences showed them that rote methods, while familiar and frankly "effective," could stifle creativity and reduce the scope for experimentation. In contrast, a creative focus aligned better with children's natural curiosity, encouraging them to invest emotionally and cognitively in the learning process. Thus, teachers found themselves gravitating toward strategies that

activated learners' voices, laughter, and kinesthetic involvement, culminating in a refreshed teaching philosophy that valued spontaneity as much as planning.

Moments of Student-Driven Breakthrough

Not all breakthroughs observed in Chapter 4 were teacher-driven. In some cases, the students themselves sparked sudden leaps in understanding or shifted the classroom dynamic in unexpected ways. One illustrative example appeared in Session Nine's debrief, where Ivy reported trying to guide her class through an inner-hearing exercise that required them to "sing silently." Initially, she expected to cue every response carefully, but as soon as the melody clicked with a few children, they began humming and then singing aloud—despite instructions to stay silent. Although it disrupted her plan, "the video showed every child was super focused," Ivy noted, pointing out that some children became overly excited and spontaneously burst into song. Instead of shutting them down for issues of control and "management," she adapted on the spot, allowing their eagerness to unify the group. This child-led surge emphasized how quickly young learners can pivot from observer to active leader when the environment invites curiosity and fun.

Another instance of student-driven momentum emerged in week 11, when Ivy rearranged ideographs—visual symbols representing musical phrases—and discovered her class grasped the idea with surprising speed. "Each child wanted to display their self-created song," she observed, describing how the children spontaneously reorganized the pictorial symbols, guessing each other's sequences. This spontaneous experimentation went beyond the planned step-by-step introduction, highlighting that once children recognized the concept, they wanted to explore freely. Rather than see this as a lapse in control, Ivy embraced their initiative, making room for group collaboration around the new, child-driven variations. In each instance, the students'

readiness to take ownership or alter the lesson's trajectory underscored the power of music to engage them deeply, and *unpredictably*. To me, these child-driven moments confirmed the study group's larger takeaway: Even carefully scaffolded activities can explode into a new learning space if children's energy is welcomed rather than suppressed, creating opportunities for teachers to be flexible and adjust their lessons on the fly.

Reflections on Failure and Iterative Improvement

Another takeaway from the study is the group's evolving perception of "failure," which they gradually reframed as valuable data for refining or redirecting their methods. Nancy's attempts to introduce chanting or movement elements that had to be aborted halfway, and Ivy's directional song that left some children disinterested, made both teachers disheartened in the moment. However, the teacher study group sessions allowed each setback to be dissected collectively, revealing overlooked causes such as insufficient vocabulary scaffolding or overly complicated lyrics. "When a teacher's approach fails, it is still part of our research and development process," Nancy remarked in one discussion, underscoring the group's shift toward trial-based learning. Rather than conclude that the entire idea was unworkable, the teachers gradually treated each hiccup as a clue indicating how to adjust pacing, simplify instructions, provide scaffolding, or incorporate visuals for future teaching. Through repeated cycles of analyzing these stumbles, they learned that iterative improvement was central to adopting creative approaches—no single attempt could fully capture the potential of a new strategy.

Over time, this iterative mindset wove itself into the fabric of their weekly planning and debriefing. Nancy recognized, for example, that after a confusing lesson on "soft C" and "soft G," she needed to slow down and break tasks into smaller steps—a decision she said was "rooted in the memory of how quickly confusion arose the first time." Ivy likewise recounted how

cutting a song into short, repetitive segments improved engagement compared to her earlier, more hurried approach. “I have learned that if a student is required to sing a long phrase, they simply cannot hold the rhythm.” Each example of failure became a steppingstone toward a refined method, reinforcing the understanding that learning is rarely about instant success. The teachers also saw that acknowledging these failures openly reduced the stigma around experimentation, as everyone could see how a lesson that “didn’t go as planned” might evolve into a stronger version the next week. Over time, they came to view even final successes—like an engaged class singing a song together—as cumulative products of multiple rounds of trial and error. The interplay between minor collapses and subsequent tweaks was thus the engine for the non-linear growth that characterized the entire group’s journey.

Final Weeks: Creative Practices Gaining Traction

By Session Eleven, the teachers’ new practices—particularly the use of ideographs—no longer felt like mere experiments but integral components of an evolving, more creative pedagogy. Ivy described how one ideograph session “extended far longer than I initially anticipated” because her students took such an active role in the process of creativity, rearranging the visual symbols and singing the resulting variations. In her debrief, Ivy expressed how the children’s energy exceeded her expectations, shifting the underlying principle from teacher-led to more spontaneously child-led. Nancy similarly found new confidence in weaving imaginative elements into her lessons once she saw students excitedly matching pictorial cues to melodic lines—“I was really surprised because they almost all managed to identify the song based on the pictures I made,” she said, conveying how she felt about her own experimentation with the ideographs before applying them to her lesson. Rachel, who early on struggled with her self-perceived inability to sing, now confidently tweaked her instructions on the fly, letting the

children apply movement, create their own ideographs, and lead parts of the singing. “We might do better if I show fewer examples,” she added, noticing that providing overly specific demonstrations limited the children’s creativity, something she had done in the past. These reflections showed that creative strategies had gained real traction, reshaping not only lesson structures but also teachers’ attitudes about control, spontaneity, and child-directed learning.

By Session Twelve, music and movement were so ingrained in the teachers’ approach that exploring imaginative or unexpected twists felt almost second nature. The final discussions highlighted how far they had traveled from their initial, hesitant experiments. “My participation in the study group was essential in introducing music to my teaching practices,” Rachel acknowledged, adding that she had not considered it a serious tool until this collaboration. Ivy discussed how she leaned into curiosity, improvisation, and active interplay, letting children reinterpret symbols, invent new ones, or propose variations spontaneously. Nancy noted that even if an activity veered off her script, she could adapt, trusting that each mini-failure illuminated the slippery path to better scaffolding. By the study group’s conclusion, each teacher had experienced enough small wins and “aha” moments to embrace, however tentatively, more creative, music-based strategies as a core part of their pedagogy. This transformation spoke directly to the project’s central thesis: professional growth often unfolds in loops and leaps rather than in neat one-directional lines, but with each loop, teachers and students discover new ways to spark genuine enthusiasm and deeper learning.

Teachers’ Own Understanding of Non-Linear Growth

A defining aspect of the study group’s journey was the teachers’ evolving meta-perspective on their own learning. Initially, they often used language that implied linear expectations: implementing one new idea each week, seeing immediate results, and then moving

on. But as repeated exposure to partial successes and cyclical setbacks piled up, they began to articulate a deeper, more nuanced view. Nancy told the group that "Collaborative discussions in our study group are a very important platform for creative teaching," signaling her acceptance of trial-based, iterative learning. Rachel spoke about how each session's group reflections built on prior weeks, forming a knowledge zigzag instead of a tidy, ascending line. Over time, these reflections crystallized into a collective acceptance that some progress might remain hidden or dormant until a sudden spark ignited it. The teachers' readiness to label these dormant stages as essential rather than wasteful speaks to how they came to see professional development as a dance of experimentation and reflection—punctuated by sudden leaps.

The study closed by illustrating each teacher's open acknowledgment of non-linear growth. Ivy likened the early sessions to scaffolding that supports a structure until the stones settle; Nancy reflected on students needing "repeated, playful exposures" before truly grasping a novel concept. Statements like these revealed a theoretical pivot: what once was viewed as a misstep or a waste of classroom time was now recognized as an integral component of deeper insight. Doubt, confusion, and even frustration were not endpoints; they were prompts for reflection that fueled the next cycle of learning. In essence, the teacher study group's experiences reaffirmed that transformative teaching doesn't flow from a linear formula but arises from an evolving interplay of curiosity, resilience, and context-driven experimentation. And, as each teacher noted in her own words, music served not simply as a "fun" supplement, but as a dynamic catalyst for creativity, collaboration, and child-centered transformation.

Summary of Theme 1: Non-Linear Learning as a (Post)Foundational Perspective

In retrospect, the journey portrayed in this section reveals that professional development, especially when new methods are involved, is an inherently non-linear process marked by

evolving teacher mindsets, reflective setbacks, and incremental victories. Early hesitations served not as signs of failure but as necessary conditions for deeper, reflective learning. Through iterative experimentation—often punctuated by moments of doubt and unexpected breakthroughs—the teachers in this study gradually built a more flexible and creative pedagogical approach. This ground up, "foundational" process was supported not only by thoughtful scaffolding of musical strategies and reflective group discussions but also by the willingness to embrace uncertainty and reframe "failures" as opportunities for growth. Understanding that the fluid and the foundational are poetically in contradiction, this finding underscores that non-linear learning is a necessary perspective that both enriches teaching practices and cultivates an adaptive, student-centered classroom environment.

Finding 2: Student Engagement as a Core Indicator of Creative Teaching Effectiveness

This study was initially designed to investigate teacher growth and the exploration of new pedagogical practices. As teachers embarked on a journey of creative experimentation, they focused on refining their own teaching strategies through self-reflection and peer discussion. However, it soon became apparent that a visible measure of creative teaching was not solely found in teacher innovation but also in the dynamic and responsive engagement of students. Observational data—changes that was visible—was very important in helping the participants change. One of the most unexpected yet illuminating findings was that teachers could quite easily determine the effectiveness of their new methods by observing how their students responded. This revelation underscored that student experience was an indispensable part of assessing innovative pedagogical practices, even if it had not been the initial focus of the research. It was a delightful surprise when the study revealed that creative teaching and effective

learning are co-constructed in the dynamic interplay between teacher intention and student action, a finding that enriched the overall inquiry.

The Emergence of Student Experience in a Teacher Focused Study

In the opening weeks of the teacher study group, participants were preoccupied with their own performance—worrying about singing accuracy or whether a movement game "fit the curriculum." Yet even in those first reflections, the data quickly revealed that student reactions were an indispensable part of the narrative. Ivy remembered students who "followed the lyrics by moving in specific directions" but then became so enthusiastic "they forgot to pay attention to what the lyrics meant," a moment that instantly redirected her analysis toward the children's experience. Rachel's description of a music warm-up painted the same picture from another angle: "Children tapped their feet, raised their hands eagerly, and even improvised gestures to match the melody," turning the room into "an interactive playground of sound and movement." Such spontaneous reactions convinced teachers that the lesson's success could be read on students' faces long before any formal assessment. As sessions progressed, the group began to treat the classroom less as a stage for teacher expertise and more as a living barometer—as the students' every nod, grin, or puzzled frown revealed the real impact of creative pedagogy. By Session Three, the refrain "What did the children think?" was already shaping debrief agendas, signaling a decisive shift from teacher-centered reflection to a student-centered lens.

I believe that this shift grew stronger each week. Ivy's first poetry and music experiment felt like a breakthrough precisely because "nearly every student engaged in this creative exercise," an outcome she celebrated as proof that rhyme-making plus movement had somehow clicked. Later, when Rachel asked her class to form shapes with their bodies, the children's lopsided triangles—"crooked and twisted," she laughed—still counted as success because every

child jumped in, revealing high motivation even if precision lagged and creativity was still lacking. Teachers began using phrases such as “you could see the spark” or “their energy shot up” to describe those micro-moments when a strategy landed. In effect, *visible engagement* became a running scoreboard: if students were moving, humming, or even giggling in sync with the lesson’s intent, the teachers knew that the pedagogy was working. By the end of the first month, the participants agreed that their creative teaching practices hinged on those immediate, observable student responses—and that noticing them was the first step toward improvement.

Reciprocal Adaptation Through Student Feedback

Student feedback quickly evolved from being an incidental observation to a systematic tool for refining instructional practices. As the study progressed, teachers began each session with the expectation that every classroom moment held valuable data, recognizing that immediate student reactions served as formative assessments, even or especially if these data took the non-tangible form of joy! Rachel’s reflection on her use of *You Are My Sunshine* was particularly striking: she first observed that “I was a bit shocked because they didn’t know the song at all, so I had them listen twice before starting,” which demonstrated that her expectation of students’ knowledge of famous English songs did not match the reality. However, after becoming more and more familiar with the song, students started to display a notable shift in their engagement. They began to recognize the tune, making it easier to memorize the adapted version based on writing conventions. Through repeated exposure coupled with new teaching techniques involving music and movement, the students’ responses evolved gradually from passive listening to active participation. Detecting this development, Rachel tailored her teaching to their improving knowledge so that they could not only sing the song correctly and fluently but also embellish their activity with movement and play. This progression underscored the value of

using real-time student feedback to inform and adjust instructional strategies, affirming that so-called “effective” teaching is an ongoing process of observation, reflection, and iterative improvement, but mostly *mutuality*.

Teachers documented moments of both noticeable confusion and engagement, treating every reaction as a critical piece of the puzzle for enhancing future instruction. This reflective, adaptive process blurred the previously distinct boundaries between teacher performance and student evaluation, establishing a *reciprocal* relationship that enriched both teaching and learning. To be clear, furthermore, both the teachers and students were reteaching and learning! The rapid cycle of observation and adaptation soon became a force of gravity of the study, embedding student feedback deeply into classroom practice. When a teacher noticed a student hesitating or an entire group synchronizing unexpectedly, it became an opportunity to recalibrate the lesson. In one pivotal moment, Ivy emphasized that “the teachers could only learn whether what we were doing was effective or not by watching the engagement of our students,” a statement that encapsulated a key lesson of the study. This idea was reinforced repeatedly during group discussions, where the recurring question “How did the children respond?” became central to the feedback process. Through these discussions, even the so-called failures were reconceptualized as an essential component of the research and development process; Nancy commented, “When a teacher’s approach fails, it is still part of our research and development process.” Such reflections underscored that the adaptive process in creative teaching is not linear but a dynamic loop fueled by authentic student feedback and continuous re-evaluation, no matter how slippery the steppingstones.

Multimodal Documentation of Student Engagement

Recognizing that individual reflections could only capture part of the classroom story, the group embraced a multimodal approach to document and analyze student engagement in real-time. This strategy ensured that every dimension of the teaching and learning experience was recorded, enabling a holistic review of classroom dynamics. Ivy suggested that "we could create a standardized reflection form that guides teachers to record both the successes and challenges of each lesson," a proposition that anchored the project in systematic written reflection. Rachel complemented that idea by proposing "using brief audio recordings immediately after class to document their thoughts quickly while the experience was fresh." To triangulate those self-reports with classroom reality, I asked everyone to record their teaching sessions and send the videos to our WeChat group chat before each subsequent session—a routine the teachers maintained for the nine weeks following Session Three. Together, the weekly videos, planning templates, and audio and written journal notes formed a deliberately multimodal archive of student engagement that we could replay, annotate, and investigate during each study group meeting.

Those layered artifacts proved their worth in capturing students' engagement! After her inner-hearing lesson, Ivy opened our debrief by pointing to her teaching clip and marveling that "the video showed every child was super focused," a level of attention she said, would have been missed without reviewing her footage. Conversely, another replay helped her admit that "the children were overwhelmed by the demand for immediate output" during an ambitious part-singing duet, prompting her to shorten the musical phrases in the next iteration. Nancy's written journal captured a parallel discovery: "Initially, I assumed the children would pick up on the vocabulary words, but I realized they weren't really catching them," a mismatch she

confirmed after comparing her reflection form and teaching video. The same combination of artifacts helped Ivy notice that "a few children seemed disengaged, possibly because my rhythmic demonstration wasn't clear enough," while Nancy, reviewing her footage, shared that "when the students had to manage their own cues, their hands were all over the place" during an antiphonning game. Rachel, analyzing participation counts on her recording, concluded: "There's a problem… the activity ended up with only about five or six kids participating actively, while the rest were less involved," and suggested that every child should sit down after singing to balance overall participation. In short, the group's commitment to seeing, hearing, and reading their classrooms through multiple lenses transformed anecdotes into evidence (and evidence into anecdotes). Quotes lifted straight from these artifacts guided each redesign cycle, turning multimodal documentation into the engine of instructional change.

Student Leadership and Autonomy as Engagement Indicators

A visible uptick in student-directed moments threaded through the later sessions. During a planning meeting on re-introducing familiar songs, Rachel argued that "having children lead part of the song is actually better than me always singing," because the hand-over "boosts recall and enthusiasm." She soon had proof: in a number-pattern review, "one child confidently recognized and began singing," and the rest of the class "enthusiastically participated" on the spot. Ivy reported the same dynamic in her chinning-plus-movement lesson: students "quickly guessed the tune and engag[ed] with the movements," convincing her to "allocate more time for student-led activities" next time. Student leadership and autonomy heightened as the creative process became more individualized. In the ideograph session, participation peaked when "each child wanted to display their self-created song," proudly walking classmates through his or her

brand-new arrangements. Moments like these reframed learners as co-creators rather than passive recipients.

Student leadership not only provided proof of deep engagement but also transformed classroom dynamics by decentralizing instructional authority. For example, when a student began initiating the hand gesture during the antiphonning activity, it signaled that the child was ready to lead and co-construct the musical routine with peers—a shift that prompted teachers to adjust their roles. Ivy observed that when students began "asking to take over the cueing," it wasn't just a sign of confidence but an invitation for their peers to participate more fully, fostering an environment of collaborative learning. This organic shift to student-led activities elevated the class's energy and encouraged children to express their individual interpretations. Furthermore, Nancy recognized the need to alter conventional participation structures to ensure equitable engagement, noting that when only a handful of students dominated, the system required adjustment. When fostered appropriately, emerging student leadership served as both a beacon of creative engagement and a diagnostic tool for refining pedagogical approaches—confirming that when students take the helm, the learning process becomes richer and more democratic.

Implications and the Value of Student Experience

Across twelve weeks, the teachers amassed a dense archive of lesson plans, journals, and videos that all pointed to the same conclusion: authentic creative teaching is validated in the instant, observable responses of students. Ivy captured the cognitive side of this reality when she said that during chinning, "the quality of their concentration rather than just participation" showed on the students' faces. Rachel highlighted the affective dimension in her music warm-up, where children "tapped their feet, raised their hands eagerly, and even improvised gestures,"

turning the room into a “playground of sound and movement.” Because such cues were now documented, replayed, and dissected, lesson planning gradually evolved into a co-creative process: teachers shared an idea, students responded in real-time, and the next iteration emerged almost immediately. The teachers’ professional growth thus became inseparable from student experience; the latter served as both compass and fuel for pedagogical innovation.

Initially, the study focused on teacher growth and the exploration of new learning pedagogies. However, it soon became apparent that the effectiveness of teaching required a close examination of student engagement. Step by step, teachers realized that the measure of their new methods was not in isolated reflections but in the live responses of their learners. They discovered that students’ engagement—be it a nod of understanding, a burst of enthusiastic participation, or even puzzled hesitation—provided evidence that guided instructional refinements. As Ivy noted, the classroom was a living laboratory where student feedback was the ultimate indicator of success, validating or challenging the innovative approaches under trial. In this way, the study revealed an unintended discovery: teacher growth and creative teaching are deeply interwoven with student engagement, as effective instruction evolves through continuous, reciprocal feedback from students. Ultimately, the student experience—from the tangibles to the non-tangibles—emerged as the core metric for both assessing and inspiring pedagogical innovation.

Summary of Theme 2: Student Engagement as a Core Indicator of Creative Teaching Effectiveness

Set out to explore teachers’ use of new pedagogical methods, this study unexpectedly revealed student engagement as a crucial indicator of effective creative teaching. Reflections shifted from teachers’ self-assessment toward combining it with student reactions—enthusiasm,

participation, or even confusion—thereby transforming classroom interactions into real-time data for instructional refinement. By documenting lessons through written journals, audio recordings, and video footage, teachers uncovered a feedback loop where every nod, smile, or puzzled look could provide formative insights. This multimodal approach not only helped to evaluate innovative teaching techniques but also guided continuous adjustments and improvements. Furthermore, as students began assuming leadership roles and directing their learning experiences, it became clear that creative teaching was not solely the product of teacher expertise. With this small group of teachers, the study shared supporting details that suggest effective creative teaching is co-constructed through ongoing, reciprocal interactions between educators and learners, with the student experience serving as both the compass and catalyst for pedagogical innovation.

Finding 3: Transforming Teacher Identity through the Teacher-Study-Group Scaffold

The first two findings established, respectively, that teacher learning in this project unfolded in non-linear loops and that student engagement, particularly emotional engagement, became a chief barometer for judging instructional success. A third layer of change now comes into view: participation in the Teacher Study Group (TSG) reshaped how the educators understood their own professional identities. Put differently, the space itself and the way it fostered revelation and disclosure became its own finding. Across twelve weeks, the TSG's blend of collaborative inquiry, multimodal documentation, and iterative experimentation cultivated a stance of *improvisation*—teachers no longer regarded creativity as a pleasant extra but as a defining element of good teaching. This shift aligns with the literature on creative pedagogical domain knowledge, which argues that expert teaching merges subject mastery with imaginative responsiveness (Beghetto, 2017). The present finding, therefore, asks not simply *what* the

teachers did but *who* they became in the process, and *how* and *where* the change was incubated. By tracing the scaffold that enabled transformation, the reconstruction of identity, the peer dynamics that sustained momentum, the action-research engine that powered iteration, and the reflective habits that promise continued growth, this section seeks to illustrate that the study group's most enduring product is a new professional narrative, a new story—one in the making.

The Teacher Study Group as a Dynamic Scaffold

The TSG's architecture featured weekly meetings, shared lesson videos, reflection forms, and facilitator-curated readings, creating overlapping layers of support. Early in the study, I attempted to link this design to constructivist theory, reminding participants that "each discussion and reflective practice serves as an opportunity for teachers to build their professional knowledge collaboratively." This dynamic, evolving process reinforces that learning is active, co-constructed, and local. Because the scaffold externalized thinking, teachers felt licensed to surface doubts, analyze missteps, and prototype revisions—activities that top-down professional development seldom encourages. Over time, the archive of artifacts became a "safety net" that caught failed trials and re-presented them as design data. Participants began to talk about *cycles*, *iterations*, and *revised versions*, signaling a shift from adherence to their traditional teaching model to inquiry-based discussions. The scaffold thus functioned simultaneously as a container for risk and a catalyst for growth. In Gersten and colleagues' (2009) terms, it enacted the three pillars of an effective learning community: active learning tasks, collegial support, and the co-construction of pedagogical knowledge.

A second layer of scaffolding in this discussion and reflection space lay in the teacher study group's deliberate use of multimodal prompts—aural, visual, kinesthetic—to keep attention on the process rather than a product. When teachers initially struggled with ideographs,

I tried to reframe confusion as evidence that "allowing students to choose and modify symbols … fosters a constructivist learning environment." This stance normalized ambiguity and encouraged teachers to treat friction points as diagnostic opportunities. By Week 9, Ivy could articulate the scaffold's cognitive demand: "You must listen carefully and observe because others might give you a gesture at any moment, and you must catch it immediately." Such comments reveal that the scaffold had become self-referential; teachers now used its language to design even more student-centered scaffolds. Over time, what initially functions as an external scaffold can evolve into a natural part of one's habitual processes; evidence of this internalization emerged as teachers began integrating scaffold-inspired strategies into their daily practice—redesigning lessons on the fly, tailoring reflection prompts to their evolving needs, and innovating beyond the original framework, including combining multiple pedagogical ideas. In doing so, the TSG shifted from being a temporary support mechanism into a fundamental mindset that continues to redefine their approach to teaching, fostering ongoing creativity and professional autonomy.

Collaborative Pedagogical Refinement

Within the scaffold, the TSG operated as a workshop where teachers refined instructional strategies in real-time. Each meeting followed a cycle of debrief, analysis, design, and forward planning built on peer-driven inquiry. During Session Seven, Ivy captured the spirit of this exchange when she reflected, "Every time something new comes up … after hearing others share their experiences, I suddenly realize how I could have done something differently." The quote illustrates how collective reflection broadened her design repertoire: hearing Nancy discuss lyric simplification or Rachel describe numbering systems prompted Ivy to rethink her own sequencing and pacing. Because suggestions could be tried out the very next day, the feedback

loop between idea and enactment was relatively short. This immediacy converted theoretical insight into classroom practice before the insight cooled, anchoring learning in concrete evidence.

The collaborative engine ensured that no effective strategy was confined to a single classroom experience. Teachers routinely shared their adaptations and observations during debrief sessions, with each colleague contributing alternative approaches to refine a promising idea. For instance, discussions revealed that even when a lesson element did not work perfectly, peers would suggest modifications that made it more adaptable and responsive to student needs. The willingness to exchange and adapt ideas illustrates how mutual validation and collective problem-solving became central to the teachers' practice. This process helped the group build a shared repertoire of strategies that evolved over time, reinforcing the notion that teaching innovations can be advanced collaboratively. In this way, individual experiences, or successes in the eyes of the teachers, were quickly embraced, disseminated, modified, and re-applied across different contexts, strengthening the overall effectiveness of their instructional methods.

Reconstruction of Teacher Identity: Shifting the Objectives-Based Mindset

During this 12-week study, collaboration wasn't hard; what proved transformative was the shift away from an objectives-based mindset that had long underpinned their traditional teaching methods. In the early weeks of the Teacher Study Group, participants primarily planned lessons around predetermined objectives, according to their curriculum, and measured success by student content recall or response to instruction. However, as collaboration deepened, they began to question whether rigid targets were stifling authentic learning. Ivy, for example, moved from using music "maybe just as a warm-up" to designing musical moments "to reinforce both engagement and skill development," signaling a break from merely delivering content to creating

learning experiences that invite exploration. This new language of design and reinforcement marked an ideological shift—teachers increasingly viewed pedagogy as a dynamic process rather than a checklist of learning outcomes. In turn, they discovered that teaching thrives when educators are willing to challenge conventional objectives and experiment with innovative approaches to foster deeper understanding.

Peer collaboration played a decisive role in dismantling the old, objectives-focused approach and exposing the deep-seated assumptions about teaching and learning. Nancy's reaction to a rhythm lesson that did not go as planned—laughing, "I tried to be creative, but the lesson didn't go as planned," then immediately proposing lyric simplification—revealed her growing comfort with risk-taking and re-conceptualizing failure as valuable feedback. Likewise, Rachel's reflection—"My participation in the study group was essential in introducing music to my teaching practices, which I would not have considered before"—underscored how the TSG's collaborative dialogue prompted her to abandon a narrow, objectives-driven mindset in favor of more fluid, student-centered practices. *The group did not merely exchange tips*; they collectively questioned and redefined the underlying ideology of their teaching. In this reflective space, peer validation became instrumental. When Ivy remarked on Rachel's newly found singing ability—transforming personal insecurity into a recognized asset—teachers collectively acknowledged that sharing experiences and openly challenging the status quo was reshaping their professional identities. This process of collaborative inquiry not only debunked traditional hierarchies of knowledge but also established a new framework where teaching is seen as an evolving, constructivist endeavor rather than a fixed set of objectives.

Peer Dynamics and Collective Change

Within the Teacher Study Group, the interpersonal climate shifted the focus from individual trial-and-error to communal learning. This shift occurred in the dissertation study, and the English language classroom. Participants openly discussed both successes and setbacks during the sessions, and these exchanges allowed them to view difficulties as shared problems rather than personal failures. As Ivy explained during one session, “Every time something new comes up … after hearing others share their experiences, I suddenly realize how I could have done something differently.” This observation demonstrates that peer feedback acted as a catalyst, not only broadening each teacher’s repertoire of strategies but also prompting the rethinking of their instructional approaches. The group’s willingness to reflect collectively—without fear of blame—created an environment in which teachers could expose blind spots and adjust on the fly. In this supportive setting, classroom experiments were not isolated incidents; instead, they became part of a shared process of problem-solving and continuous improvement. Over time, this mutual exchange fostered what Bandura (2000) called “collective efficacy,” a shared belief among teachers that together they could overcome any instructional challenge.

The dynamics of this group exchange were further highlighted when colleagues’ success stories spurred immediate personal adaptations. For instance, Nancy recalled that after discussing a challenging lesson with her peers, she felt encouraged to modify her approach: “After discussing it with my colleagues and seeing their success, I tried it in my next lesson.” Similarly, Rachel later noted that collaborative dialogue prompted her to abandon her earlier, narrow focus on content recall in favor of more student-centered practices. These authentic reflections underscore how open dialogue and mutual validation broke down the old, isolated notions of teaching. Instead, every shared idea or adjustment became a building block in a larger, collective

framework for innovation, even as we acknowledged the fluid nature of these building blocks, not a contradiction but an antinomy. This process of diffusing individual insights across the group also fostered a new professional paradigm where innovative teaching is seen as a shared endeavor rather than a solitary pursuit.

Action Research as the Engine of Iteration

Beneath the TSG scaffold and its peer dynamics ran a methodological motor: action research. Every new technique was framed as a live experiment that followed Kemmis & McTaggart's (2014) spiral of *plan → act → observe → reflect*. Nancy voiced the ethos most plainly when she reminded the group, *"When a teacher's approach fails, it is still part of our research and development process."* Because "failure" was re-labeled as *data*, a lesson that "didn't go as planned" became evidence instead of an indictment of competence. The spiral quickly took concrete form. After her song introduction activity proved "much harder than I expected," Nancy immediately proposed, "*If I change the lyrics and repeat 'the east' multiple times, it might be easier for them to hear and remember.*" Two days later, she reran the lesson with the simplified lyric set and documented sharper student timing. Similarly, Ivy diagnosed that long melodic phrases overloaded her class—"*If a student is required to sing a long phrase, they simply cannot hold the rhythm.*" She recut the song into two-beat segments and saw participation jump the next week. These micro-iterations illustrate how action research legitimized rapid redesigns and kept momentum high.

Action research also helped teachers navigate the perennial tensions between innovation and curricular pacing. Nancy acknowledged that experimenting "takes time away from what we originally planned to cover," yet she still chose to test concepts such as ideographs because the potential payoff justified the temporal investment. By documenting outcomes and sharing them

in the TSG, she built a case for iterative refinement rather than abandonment. Over time, the teachers began to incorporate explicit hypotheses into their planning, identifying anticipated outcomes and measures for *success*. For example, Ivy systematically adjusted the length of musical phrases, hypothesizing that shorter segments would improve student rhythm tracking, and planned to measure effectiveness by noting increased student participation and accuracy. Similarly, Rachel deliberately varied the level of scaffolding provided in her ideograph activities, predicting that fewer examples would stimulate greater student creativity, and documented success through the diversity of student-generated symbols in subsequent sessions. This structured, reflective approach helped teachers to balance creativity and curricular coverage, helping instructional experimentation complement rather than disrupt required content. As the action research mindset became habitual, pedagogical evolution no longer depended on external prompts; it was embedded in the teachers' planning, potentially signaling that inquiry-driven growth would continue after the formal study concluded.

Summary of Theme 3: Transforming Teacher Identity through the Teacher-Study-Group Scaffold

Finding 3 reveals that participation in the Teacher Study Group not only introduced new instructional strategies but fundamentally transformed how teachers saw themselves. Simply put, the setting became a finding. Over the twelve-week period, the TSG's layered support system served as a dynamic scaffold that encouraged teachers to question established, objectives-based models. This scaffold created an environment where theoretical insights and classroom experiments were continuously re-evaluated and refined, enabling educators to shift their mindset from simply delivering content to designing engaging learning experiences that foster deeper understanding. Collaboration within this dynamic framework reshaped teacher identity by

instilling a constructivist, inquiry-driven approach. Peer feedback and mutual validation played a decisive role, as teachers openly shared challenges, adapted promising ideas in real time, and collectively redefined what constitutes effective teaching. In parallel, action research emerged as a methodological engine, driving iterative cycles of experimentation and reflection. Educators documented outcomes, adjusted lesson components based on evidence, and navigated the tension between innovation and curricular pacing. Ultimately, the transformation observed goes beyond the adoption of new techniques—it is about who the teachers became: creative, adaptable, and collaborative professionals committed to ongoing pedagogical evolution. It was about becoming.

Summary

In conclusion, the three findings that emerged from Chapter 4 serve as a reminder that transformative teaching is an evolving journey. The non-linear nature of teacher learning suggests that the initial missteps and moments of doubt are, in fact, vital catalysts for eventual growth. Evidence of students' spontaneous, dynamic responses in the classroom shows that creative, innovative approaches can surpass traditional measures, cultivating richer and more meaningful learning experiences. Furthermore, the profound shift in teacher identity observed within the Teacher Study Group underscores that professional development is not just about acquiring new techniques—it is about reimagining the very role and mindset of the teacher. By embracing risk, collaboration, and reflective practice, educators can redefine their own standards and forge instructional strategies that resonate with students. Chapter 5 illustrates, I hope, that when teachers are supported to experiment and innovate, both their practice and their professional identities can be transformed, ultimately creating more vibrant, responsive, and student-centered learning environments.

Chapter 6: Lessons Learned and Next Steps

This chapter synthesizes and contextualizes the key findings of my dissertation study, in which I examined how Chinese early childhood educators integrated music and movement into their teaching practices through a structured and collaborative Teacher Study Group (TSG). Guided by three interconnected research questions, the study aimed to understand: (1) how educators transition from using music and movement primarily for engagement to structured, pedagogically driven strategies; (2) the multidimensional ways music fosters young children's holistic development; and (3) the role of collaborative, reflective professional learning communities in continuously refining and innovating teaching methods. Over a 12-week period, three Chinese educators engaged in reflective action research, collaborating closely to explore and adapt music-based pedagogies within their English language classrooms. In addressing these research questions, the study generated three findings, or themes. I believe these findings illuminate meaningful changes in instructional practices. They also contribute theoretical and practical insights into teacher education, curriculum design, and broader educational policy, particularly within the Chinese educational context.

Finding 1: Navigating the Non-Linear Path to Pedagogical Integration

The first research question sought to explore how early childhood educators transitioned from employing music and movement solely as engagement tools to embedding these elements as structured, pedagogically driven strategies. The study began expecting a straightforward, linear progression, but the data revealed a far more intricate pattern. It revealed that the transformation was, in fact non-linear, an iterative process marked by early hesitations, experimental trials, and reflective adjustments. Initially, teachers used music and movement simply to energize the classroom and captivate young learners, often relying on these techniques

as a hook rather than as part of a coherent pedagogical framework. However, these early approaches quickly uncovered not only the limitations of a purely engagement-driven or "functional" use, but rather the potential for deeper instructional applications. Collaborative discussions and critical reflections among educators eventually provided a robust scaffold that empowered them to reframe setbacks as vital learning opportunities. This iterative process both enhanced classroom practices and laid the groundwork for embedding music and movement into the curriculum with clear pedagogical intent.

During our discussions, participants noted that "failures" often generated the most fruitful adjustments, illustrating that progress unfolded in slippery loops rather than straight lines. Educators learned to appreciate that early missteps and uncertainties are not failures, but rather steppingstones toward developing more intentional and effective strategies. The study group emerged as a fluid space where teacher identity transformed through collaborative inquiry, shifting focus from solely using music as a means of engagement to designing structured, content-driven musical activities. As teachers refined their methods, evidence showed that music and movement could be harmonized with academic objectives, thereby reinforcing both language and cognitive skills. Immediate student feedback served as an ongoing barometer, validating and guiding these creative processes, even or especially when judged through emotions. In sum, sustainable professional growth in creative pedagogy depends on embracing a cyclical process of experimentation and re-evaluation, redefining the role of music not merely as a tool for engagement but as an integral element of effective teaching strategies.

For teachers, the observed pattern of trying, noticing, adjusting, and retrying accords with Allsup's account of learning in open, laboratory-style encounters, where form remains flexible and inquiry is foregrounded, and with Richards's view that understanding emerges through

action and reflection rather than front-loaded explanation. The TSG architecture contributes to this stance by cycling enactment, collaborative analysis, and forward planning. In practice, these cycles normalize uncertainty, treat missteps as information for redesign, and steadily shift attention from reproducing techniques to designing responsive encounters. The routine of debriefing classroom trials, studying a focused idea together, comparing it with current materials, and planning the next iteration creates a feedback loop in which conceptual insight and procedural know-how develop in tandem. Taken together, these perspectives frame the non-linear trajectories in this study as characteristic of practice-centered, inquiry-driven development, where growth is expected to be recursive, embodied, and context-sensitive rather than linear or uniform.

A reader might reasonably find that this finding was not terribly surprising, that the participants experienced setbacks before arriving at more refined, intentional uses of music and movement. Yet it is precisely within the confluence of a Confucian educational heritage, where harmony, respect for authority, and mastery of established knowledge are prized, and a global, neoliberal emphasis on tightly measured outcomes, that the release of failure as a generative force might become momentous. In both Chinese classrooms and Western systems alike, the dominant mindset treats mistakes as endpoints rather than opportunities for growth. After all, who would argue that failure has little or no place in education? However, our study might serve as an antithesis to that assumption, that minor “failures” were, in fact, the crucibles in which more effective strategies were forged. Participants repeatedly noted that what initially felt like missteps—awkward activity designs, unclear scaffolding—prompted the insightful collaborative reflections and led to substantive pedagogical adjustments. By surfacing these dynamics, we underscore that embracing reflective failure is not an anomaly but an essential component of

sustainable, creative teaching practice—challenging educators and policymakers everywhere to rethink systems that prize immediate "success" over long-term innovation.

Finding 2: Engagement as the Heartbeat of Holistic Development

The second research question examined how music functions as a multidimensional pedagogical tool to foster young children's holistic development across physical, cognitive, social-emotional, and linguistic domains. Yet the analysis for Finding 2 indicates that student engagement emerged as the clearest, near-term metric for evaluating creative teaching effectiveness. In other words, although the study set out to track broad developmental outcomes, the data suggests that vibrant, on-task emotional involvement is an especially informative indicator deserving closer attention. This interpretation aligns with Allsup's view of democratic musicking as a whole encounter—social, cognitive, and aesthetic rather than a sum of isolated techniques—and with Richards's treatment of song-experience as integrative, bringing sound, movement, language, and feeling into coordinated action (Allsup, 2016; Richards, 1978). When educators effectively integrate music and movement, students not only remain engaged but also demonstrate leadership, creativity, and responsiveness—factors that plausibly underwrite broader developmental gains. Accordingly, vibrant student engagement is not merely an outcome but also a reasonable proxy for the holistic benefits that music-rich pedagogies can deliver. By prioritizing and monitoring these signs of active participation, teachers can infer that their innovative teaching methods are likely contributing to the essential developmental domains outlined in Chapter 2. In this way, the interdependence of creative teaching effectiveness and student engagement provides an indirect lens on holistic development, reinforcing that sustained, purposeful participation is a critical indicator of comprehensive growth.

Building on the theoretical frameworks in Chapters 1 and 2, the observed classroom dynamics provide concrete evidence of how music and movement drive vibrant student engagement while simultaneously supporting holistic growth. As educators refined their approaches through iterative experimentation and reflection, the resulting engagement both validated the instructional designs and pointed toward deeper, underlying developmental progress. Real-time feedback from students —seen in their readiness to participate, to take initiative, and to respond musically and verbally—served as a practical diagnostic, helping teachers continually align their practices with developmental goals. In this manner, lively, responsive participation bridges the broad theoretical benefits of music and movement with the measurable impact of creative teaching strategies. Tracking engagement offers a workable indicator of instructional effectiveness while reasonably signaling growth across multiple domains (Allsup, 2016; Richards, 1978).

Finding 3: Identity Transformation Through Collaborative Inquiry

The third research question sought to examine how educators leverage a collaborative teacher study group, grounded in reflective practice and action research, to continuously refine and innovate their instructional methods. However, through the course of this study, Finding 3—Transforming Teacher Identity through the Teacher Study Group Scaffold—revealed that the very process of engaging in a supportive, reflective, and collaborative environment was central to this transformation of this philosophy. In other words, the study group did not simply serve as a platform for troubleshooting isolated classroom challenges through creative teaching practices; instead, it played an active role in reshaping teachers' professional identities. Initially, the educators entered the group with entrenched, objectives-based mindsets, relying on music and movement as ad hoc engagement tools. Through iterative cycles of planning, action, reflection,

and peer feedback, they began to view the creative process not merely as a supplement to instruction but as a fundamental component of their teaching philosophy. They started to question traditional practices and embraced a mindset where experimentation and reflective adaptation became as integral to teaching as established curricular demands. In this way, every misstep and every reflective "aha" moment contributed to a gradual but significant redefinition of their roles as educators.

As educators engaged more deeply with one another, the teacher study group emerged not just as a support structure but as the driving force behind change, temporary or lasting. By pooling their experiences, critiques, challenges, and successes, teachers co-created new practices that they then tested, refined, and internalized, what Allsup (2016) calls a laboratory setting. This collective journey fostered a sense of shared ownership over pedagogical innovation, reinforcing the idea that identity transformation is itself a collaborative act. The TSG scaffold enabled educators to move from using music and movement in piecemeal ways to embedding these creative elements into a mostly cohesive, always-evolving teaching philosophy. In short, the evidence from Finding 3 suggests that the group's design was not simply helpful—it was essential! When teachers participate in sustained, reflective, and action-oriented communities, they don't just learn new strategies; they become new kinds of teachers, equipped with both the mindset and the tools for ongoing creative evolution.

As the growth occurred within the teacher study group, I would be remiss if I did not identify myself in the transformation. Initially, the design of the study and my attention were centered on the teachers. In doing so, I was at fault for not looking closely enough at the children. I expected the study to unfold smoothly and focused mainly on teachers' trajectories and concerns. Yet, as the cycles progressed, I found myself surprised, drawn again and again to

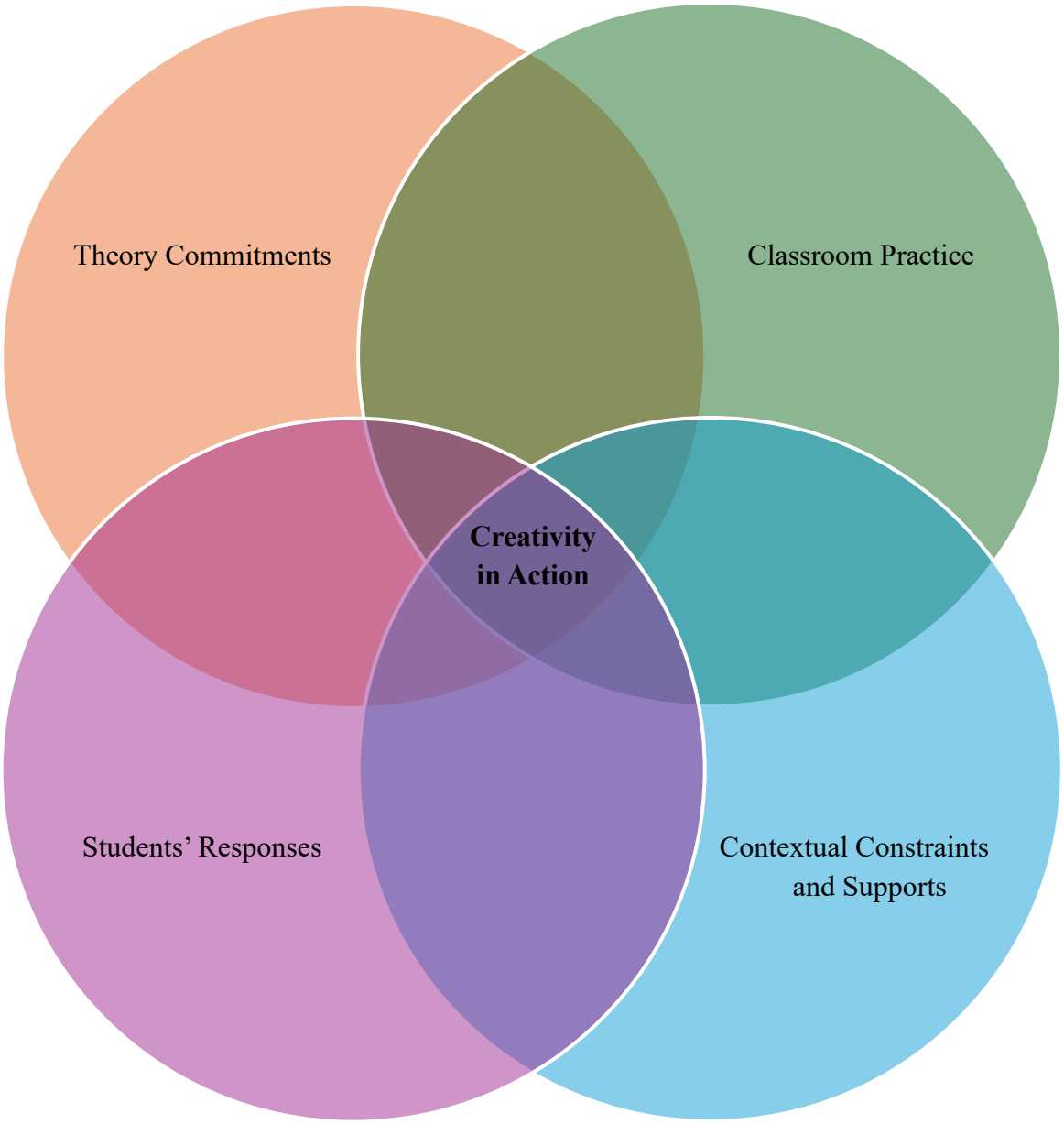
students' in-the-moment responses and creativity. Therefore, like the participants, my own learning was also non-linear. This recognition became part of the finding itself; it supports the case that transformation into creative pedagogy is co-constructed with, and not separate from, students' engagement.

The findings in this chapter also pressed me to reconsider how the study's conceptual framework operates in practice. Across cycles, I witnessed alongside the teachers that students' live responses did not sit at the periphery but acted as causal inputs, and that creative change proceeded non-linearly rather than along straight lines. These insights relocate the action to the middle of classroom life, not at either end of a theory-then-practice pipeline. Therefore, I decided to amend the original framework and name the middle space Creativity in Action.

Creativity in Action: An Amended Conceptual Framework

In Chapter 1, I combined creative and reflective teaching (Allsup), Education Through Music and SongWorks (Richards), and the teacher study group (Gersten et al.) to hold theory and practice together. Those lenses offered theoretical and practical commitments by the teachers, such as teaching the whole child, reflective inquiry, play, and collaboration, and extended a structure for sustained, iterative change. In light of the present findings, I intend to reconstruct the framework and locate it in the middle of classroom life, where lessons actually unfold and where children's participation continually reshapes what teachers do and notice.

Figure 5. Creativity in Action: An Amended Conceptual Framework



The first circle, Theory Commitments, remains an anchor but now serves as a living set of orientations rather than a scaffold applied from above. Teachers' creative and reflective stance, the ETM and SongWorks emphasis on nurturing, play, and learning through experimentation, and the study group's design for sustained learning continue to orient decisions, yet they do so as commitments interpreted in use. This maintains a principled approach while allowing for responsive revision in the moment. The second circle, Classroom Practice, encapsulates the concrete moves by which theory becomes teacher actions. In this study, those moves were generated and refined through a recursive cycle that turned ideas into action and then returned action to inquiry. Because teacher change unfolded non-linearly, practice functions here not as a terminal site of application but as a propeller of theory in motion.

The third circle, Students' Responses, takes its position in the driver's seat. Students' visible and audible signals—attention, gesture, and improvisation—became inputs that redirected planning and in-the-moment decisions. In this reframing, co-construction is not metaphorical; it is a procedural process that occurs in real time as teachers attune to those signals. The last circle, Contextual Constraints and Supports, acknowledges the influences that shape practice, such as curricular guidelines, institutional culture, and collegial resources, which could impact the classroom. Rather than treating these as external barriers, the amended framework includes them as parameters that guide invention. Constraints, in a sense, are viewed as levers that channel creative decision making.

What the findings also suggested is the relation among the circles. Change is no longer imagined as theory applied to practice, with children responding at the end; instead, change occurs where the four circles overlap and continually influence one another. At that center is Creativity in Action, where teachers plan for musical and pedagogical affordances, attune to

students' signals to recalibrate complexity and pacing, and work within real constraints that hold the new practice together. The implications that follow are derived from this middle-space configuration, where commitments, moves, signals, and constraints co-produce change. They propose what teachers can do to design for creativity-in-action under real curricular and institutional conditions, as well as suggest how professional learning structures can sustain those designs across time.

Implications for Practice: Cultivating Creative Classrooms

Transforming Learning Through Affective and Creative Practices

This study's practical takeaways highlight the need to prioritize not only the learning process but also the affective and multimodal dimensions of learning (Jackson, 2018; Bouchey et al., 2021). Through the TSG experience, teachers discovered that fostering confidence and creativity within their teaching can enable them to attend more fully to students, moving beyond checking mere word retention in language acquisition. When teachers feel confident and creative, they can transform an English lesson—or any lesson—into an experience that students both master and emotionally connect with. The study supports a common logic that if students do not enjoy learning a subject—English in this case—even the best academic strategies fall short; without enjoyment, memorization rarely leads to lasting mastery. By weaving music, movement, and playful inquiry into lessons, teachers can shift the classroom environment from one of enforced memorization to one of genuine engagement and intrinsic motivation, especially in Chinese contexts. English can become a subject of delight rather than duty. Therefore, by embedding creative teaching strategies into professional development programs, schools in China can—might—cultivate communities that value both academic achievement and the joy of learning.

The practice implications point to a reimagined role for Chinese educators as facilitators of learning who are as focused on cultivating an enjoyable classroom climate even as they are in meeting academic standards. The TSG scaffold demonstrated that when teachers feel safe to experiment and reflect, they can model new confidence and new experiments in creativity for their students. Over time, students may begin to see themselves as English speakers and users, not just rote memorizers. This shift is significant given that traditional standards often emphasize technical skills without addressing the importance of enjoyment. The transformations observed in the study group suggest that when educators are supported in experimenting with innovative, reflective, student-centered strategies, they can spark an evolving school culture where learning is both effective and meaningful. Such an environment could bolster language skills and nurture broader intellectual and emotional growth by linking academic content with genuine student interests. In this way, embracing a reflective, creative approach in daily practice can elevate overall student engagement, making learning an intrinsically rewarding journey that inspires lasting success.

Extending Music and Movement Across Subject Areas

Beyond English language acquisition, the integration of music and movement holds promise for enhancing learning across different subject areas. When educators incorporate musical and kinesthetic elements into lessons, they create multisensory experiences that make abstract concepts more tangible and memorable. For example, to teach multiplication or fractions, activities such as clapping to a beat can illustrate numerical patterns, transforming rote exercises into dynamic, embodied experiences. Science topics—from the water cycle to life processes—come alive through choreographed movements set to song, helping students observe and internalize cycles and systems. This interdisciplinary approach reveals the

interconnectedness of knowledge, strengthening critical thinking and retention (Ivanitskaya et al., 2002). In the Chinese context, weaving music and movement across disciplines can shift classrooms from rote memorization toward holistic, student-driven inquiry.

An interdisciplinary strategy emphasizes the synergy between academic content and creative expression. By crafting lessons that cross subject boundaries, educators can potentially foster deeper connections among concepts that might otherwise remain isolated. Historical narratives become immersive through period songs and dances; cultural studies come alive when students sing and move to the rhythms of the era. Similarly, music as a mnemonic device in math or science can help students encode complex information through rhythmic repetition and coordinated gestures, bridging theoretical understanding with practical application. This approach caters to diverse learning styles—auditory, visual, kinesthetic—providing a supportive environment that invites active engagement, reveals subject interconnections, and demonstrates how creative methods deepen academic growth.

Future Directions: Extending the Impact of Music-Based Professional Learning

Mapping Long-Term Growth: Beyond the 12-Week Window

The first finding showed that teachers' shift from using music and movement as simple engagement "hooks" to embedding them as core pedagogical tools is a looping, back-and-forth journey rather than a straight line. To understand whether such growth endures, future studies should follow participants beyond the 12-week window used here, returning after six months, a year, and even several school years, let's say. Longitudinal designs will help clarify which creative routines consolidate, which regress, and what new iterations emerge as curricular demands, leadership, or policy contexts change. They needn't be overly elaborate. Just a study group organized around immediate needs and hopes. Comparative work is also needed:

researchers could contrast the Teacher Study Group (TSG) model with other common professional development formats—such as one-time workshops, peer coaching, or online asynchronous courses—to see whether teacher learning in those settings experiences similar ups and downs in adopting music and movement practices. By tracking different groups over time, we can identify which approaches might help teachers build lasting confidence and skill, and which tend to fade once initial support ends. This knowledge would guide schools in choosing the right development model to nurture genuinely sustainable, creative teaching.

From Engagement to Development: Charting Developmental Pathways

Finding 2 positioned lively, on-task engagement as the classroom signal that creative teaching is working, yet left open the discussion of which developmental gains engagement actually drives. Future studies could employ both qualitative and quantitative measures to map moment-to-moment participation in music and movement activities onto progress in four key domains—physical, cognitive, social-emotional, and linguistic. For example, structured observation rubrics as well as qualitative narratives, might document gains in children's fine and gross motor coordination as they follow choreographed movement cues. Parallel language development checklists could track how often children adopt new vocabulary or construct more complex sentences after song-based lessons. Teacher and peer interviews, supplemented by multimodal child self-reports, could reveal advances in social skills such as turn-taking, empathy, and leadership. Parent and caregiver surveys could then capture broader emotional shifts—ranging from increased self-confidence to greater enthusiasm for school. Overall, a mixed-methods battery that aligns specific engagement behaviors with standardized developmental benchmarks would allow researchers to treat engagement not simply as a by-product of creative teaching but as the very bridge to holistic child growth.

Scaling & Adapting the Teacher Study Group Model

The identity shifts documented in Finding 3 emerged inside a small, facilitated teacher study group; the pressing question is whether this model travels. Scaling trials should replicate the TSG across multiple learning centers and preschools to identify which design features—session length, facilitator prompts, artifact sharing—must remain constant and which can adapt. Parallel experiments could test offline or hybrid formats to see whether asynchronous communities can reproduce the psychological safety and rapid feedback that fueled transformation here. We should also look closely at the time, space, and materials that a Teacher Study Group requires so that schools can realistically plan and budget for it. Gathering straightforward feedback from teachers about which parts of the TSG—be it group discussions, shared lesson videos, or reflection questions—felt most valuable will help pinpoint the "must-have" elements versus extras that can be streamlined. From there, researchers can develop a step-by-step TSG toolkit that any preschool or learning center can adopt, whether they have a team of thirty teachers or just five. By combining practical resource planning with direct teacher input, we can create a flexible, easy-to-implement model that preserves the supportive community and rapid feedback loops that drive real, lasting change.

Limitations

My professional work in cultural diplomacy inevitably orients my noticing toward the civic and relational value of creative pedagogy. This standpoint shaped what I attended to and how I interpreted co-construction, especially where classroom creativity intersects with broader cultural aims. I present this not as a bias but as a perspective that oriented the study's questions and interpretations. In addition, elements of the teacher study group and facilitation may appear top-down or managerial to readers outside the Chinese context, and even "radical" relative to

some Western professional learning norms. In this setting—an out-of-school English learning center in China—the structure intended to meet local needs for coherence, continuity, and curricular alignment. I would like to remind readers to interpret the model in relation to its sociocultural and institutional conditions rather than against a single global template.

All participating teachers at the site were women and I am male; while gender likely shaped interactional dynamics, it was not a formal analytic lens in this study. I therefore refrain from causal claims about gendered effects. Future work should examine how gender mediates creative risk-taking, facilitation, and teacher learning in similar settings. Lastly, this study does not establish how long the observed transformations will persist once external facilitation ends; teachers may be pulled back by institutional routines, assessment pressures, and staffing changes. Sustainability likely requires ongoing peer-collaboration structures, administrative protection for time, and alignment with curricular expectations. Because the project leveraged pre-existing rapport and then deliberately cultivated it, replication in settings without comparable trust may require a longer runway of relational work, and a longitudinal, multi-site design would be necessary to test conditions under which these practices become durable.

Closing Remarks

This study offers a testament to the power of creative, reflective practice in transforming both teacher mindsets and student experiences. By tracing the slippery journey of three Chinese early childhood educators, we have seen how music and movement can evolve from simple engagement tools into intentional pedagogical strategies. Equally illuminating is the pivotal role of student engagement—not merely as a fleeting spark of attention but as a robust indicator of holistic development across physical, cognitive, social-emotional, and linguistic domains. Finally, the Teacher Study Group scaffold has emerged as more than just a professional

development format; it has proven itself a crucible for identity transformation, a community, where collaborative inquiry and sustained action research ignite lasting innovation in instructional practice. I believe that, taken together, these findings (surprising or otherwise) underscore that meaningful change in education will arise when teachers are afforded space to experiment, reflect, and learn alongside one another.

Looking forward, this research lays the groundwork for broader efforts to embed creativity at the heart of all early childhood education—both in China, North America, and beyond. It invites policymakers, curriculum designers, and school leaders to reconsider traditional, top-down models of professional learning in favor of more participatory, iterative approaches that honor the complexity of teaching and learning. Moreover, it challenges us to redefine success not by standardized test scores alone but by the vibrancy of student engagement, the confidence of teachers to take pedagogical risks, and the degree to which classroom communities can feel safe, inspired, and joyful. As the field advances, I hope that these insights will guide the development of scalable tools, longitudinal studies, and hybrid learning communities—each designed to sustain the slippery loops of experimentation and reflection that fuel genuine pedagogical growth. In the end, if we aspire to cultivate classrooms where every child sees learning as both rigorous and delightful, we must continue to invest in the creative capacities of their teachers—nurturing the music in their classrooms and the movement in their hearts.

Epilogue: From Classrooms to Cultural Diplomacy

As I reflect upon my current role at the United Nations as a cultural diplomat, and as I revisit the journey of my doctoral research, I am struck by the interconnectedness of education, creativity, and diplomacy. At first glance, the humble setting of a small teacher study group in China might seem worlds apart from the grand diplomatic arenas of international relations, to say nothing of the United Nations itself. Yet, upon closer examination, meaningful parallels begin to emerge. Each educator's decision to creatively integrate music into their teaching becomes an act, an art, of cultural diplomacy—one that bridges not only the classroom and community, but also local and global contexts.

Cultural diplomacy often conjures images of international performances, grand exhibitions, and high-level exchanges. However, at its core, this imperative resides in much quieter, simpler actions—the thoughtful sharing and respectful exchange of ideas, practices, and cultural expressions, something that allows people and communities to speak and listen to one another. My experiences at the United Nations have deepened my appreciation for how essential, ground up, grassroots educational practices are in fostering this kind of global dialogue (Shieh, 2020). In classrooms thousands of miles from UN Headquarters, educators are already participating in cultural diplomacy by introducing their students to new worlds through songs, movement, and language, nurturing an appreciation for diversity from the earliest stages of learning.

In the teacher study group, I witnessed educators shift from viewing music as merely an engagement tactic to understanding it as a powerful pedagogical strategy. But more than instructional change, what I observed was a *quiet* form of diplomacy: teachers curating cultural experiences that prepared their students not only as learners of English, but as future global

citizens. Each song learned and shared, each playful movement, nurtured empathy, creativity, and openness, the very qualities that underpin effective cultural diplomacy.

Working within the United Nations system right now, I see daily reminders of the power inherent in these small yet significant educational gestures. These gestures are not only about formal diplomacy or structured international exchange programs, but about nurturing global awareness through everyday classroom interactions. Each teacher who courageously experiments, adapts, and reflects creatively is cultivating a microcosm of cultural understanding and mutual respect. Such classrooms, driven by creative teachers committed to simply trying something new, represent seeds of global peace and cooperation as these educators honor a "social contract" of acting in the best interests of their student-citizens by "reaching beyond incomplete musical engagements and into larger and more intertwined social, artistic, and political domains" (p. 47), a term Allsup and Shieh (2012) called public music pedagogy. My dissertation was initially intended for music educators, but in my humble opinion, its promise extends meaningfully to any teacher who incorporates music or the arts into their teaching practice.

Reflecting on this journey—from the intimate classroom spaces in China to the expansive global stage at the United Nations—I am more convinced than ever that fostering creative teaching is, in its own way, fostering global understanding. This research and my current work are not separate endeavors, but part of a shared narrative—one where each educational choice and classroom innovation contributes quietly but powerfully to the ongoing work of cultural diplomacy. It is, perhaps, the most authentic and enduring form of diplomacy: one enacted daily by cultural workers around the world, shaping hearts and minds through the profound experience of music.

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Appendix A: Lesson Planning Form

Teacher:
Date:
Lesson Topic:
Class Level:

1. Strategy to Implement

- **New Idea/Strategy**:
  (Briefly describe the new teaching strategy to be used.)

2. Implementation Plan

- **Which part of the lesson will I implement this new strategy?**
  (Specify which section or activity of the lesson the strategy will be applied to, such as the introduction, main teaching phase, conclusion, etc.)

- **How will I implement this strategy in my lesson?**
  (Outline the steps or activities where this strategy will be applied.)

- **Will I modify the strategy for my classroom context?**
  ☐ Yes
  ☐ No

If **Yes**, briefly describe the modifications:
(E.g., adjusting for student needs, time constraints, or materials.)

3. Resources Needed

- **List any additional resources required**:
  (E.g., songs, videos, handouts, technology tools.)

4. Anticipated Challenges

- **What potential challenges might arise during implementation?**
  (E.g., student engagement, time management.)

5. Success Criteria

- **How will I know this strategy is successful?**
  (Define what successful outcomes will look like.)

Signature:
Date:

Appendix B: Personal Reflection Journal Form

Name:
Date:
Lesson/Strategy Implemented:
Class/Training Context:

1. Reflection on Implementation

- **What did I implement in my class/teacher training today?**
  (Briefly describe the strategy or lesson that was used.)

2. Observations and Student Reactions

- **How did the students respond to the strategy?**
  (Provide specific examples, noting engagement, participation, and reactions.)
- **What evidence did I observe that indicated success or challenges?**
  (Consider students' behavior, understanding, or feedback.)

3. Personal Feelings and Insights

- **How did I feel about the implementation?**
  (Reflect on your emotions—confidence, excitement, frustration, etc.)
- **What personal insights did I gain from this experience?**
  (Did anything unexpected happen? What did you learn about yourself as a teacher?)

4. Evaluation of Effectiveness

- **What worked well in the implementation?**
  (Highlight specific elements of the lesson or strategy that were effective.)
- **What didn't work as expected?**
  (Note any challenges, obstacles, or areas where the lesson fell short.)

5. Future Adjustments

- **What changes will I make for next time?**
  (Consider modifications to the lesson, strategy, or resources.)
- **What additional resources or support do I need to improve this strategy?**
  (Think about songs, activities, materials, or peer support that could help.)

6. Connection to Broader Teaching Practice

- **How does this experience connect to my broader goals as a teacher?**
  (Link your reflections to your personal teaching philosophy or long-term professional development goals.)

7. Questions for the Next Study Group Meeting

- **What questions or concerns do I want to bring to the next Teacher Study Group?**
  (Identify areas where you need feedback, advice, or support from colleagues.)

Signature:
Date:

Appendix C: SongWorks Principles

SongWorks I

Principles of Teaching and Learning

1. Students have the right to be treated with respect and dignity for their ideas, skills and stages of development.
2. Students deserve an engaging learning environment in which they feel safe enough to demonstrate freely their understandings and skills through various types of participation.
3. Student learning is the responsibility of both teachers and students.
4. Learning is holistic and constructive.
5. A teacher's attitudes, behaviors, and methodologies should be compatible.
6. Accurate and constructive feedback helps students become independent learners.
7. Quality of life is enriched through music and singing.

SongWorks II

Principles of Teaching and Learning Music

1. The major goal of music study is the development of a responsiveness to music.
2. The musicality that is critical to music performance is just as important in music study.
3. The fundamental skill in music behavior is listening.
4. The way music sounds rather than how it looks guides the selection and presentation of patterns for study.
5. A distinction exists between skills and concepts that are musically easy and those that are musically simple.
6. Song provides direct involvement for making music and studying sound relationships.