

Inclusion Through Ensemble: Simple Orff Arrangements for Mixed-Ability Groups

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses the use of simplified Orff-based ensemble arrangements as a framework for inclusion in the mixed-ability music classroom. The challenge of creating meaningful opportunities for participation in ensemble music-making for learners with a wide range of cognitive, physical, and emotional needs remains a central focus for classroom music educators. The Orff Schulwerk, with its emphasis on creativity, movement, rhythm, and improvisation, offers a flexible model for inclusive group participation, in which all learners can play a valued and contributing role.

In this qualitative, literature-based synthesis, we review the evidence from scholarly and professional literature to identify the pedagogical principles, ensemble strategies, and classroom practices that can help educators create inclusive communities of music-making. We highlight approaches to adaptation and arrangement that feature simplified rhythmic and melodic materials, layered percussion and pentatonic ostinati, and peer-assisted group collaboration. These features provide all learners with entry points for participation while preserving the integrity and expressiveness of ensemble playing.

Our findings suggest that inclusive Orff ensembles support social interaction, empathy, and collaborative learning, and can thus enhance both musical and social growth. Students develop a sense of confidence and agency through participation in rhythm circles, movement activities, and collaborative improvisations that are intentionally designed to be accessible to a range of abilities. Teachers also benefit from the flexibility and adaptability of the Orff-based methods, which support differentiation without stigmatizing or singling out individual learners.

The study concludes that simple Orff arrangements can help create an inclusive music classroom community in which all differences are seen as a source of richness and creativity. We recommend that teacher education and professional development should include a focus on adaptive arranging skills, differentiated instruction, and ensemble facilitation to support ongoing inclusive practices. Overall, the Orff approach shows great promise for promoting a blend of accessibility, artistry, and social connection in the 21st-century music classroom.

Keywords: inclusion, Orff Schulwerk, ensemble learning, mixed-ability groups, differentiated instruction, peer collaboration, music education.

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INTRODUCTION

Background and Rationale

The concept of inclusion is at the heart of current educational policy, both internationally and domestically. Every child, regardless of ability, should be entitled to quality education. In many cases, the arts are the first to break down these barriers, as everyone can take part in music, regardless of their ability to speak or read. Jellison (2015) refers to an inclusive approach to music education, noting that it should not only be about access to the curriculum, but also about building an inclusive community and social attitude. Inclusion in music means the conscious and ethical choice to create a space where children, including those with disabilities, can learn, perform, and create music together.

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In this case, ensemble learning in music can be a kind of social equalizer and a form of free expression. When children sing, clap, and move together to a common rhythm and pulse, they enter a space of mutual understanding and support, where cognitive, sensory, and emotional differences are easily overcome.

Ensemble activities allow developing in children the valuable qualities of empathy, patience, and mutual responsibility, as well as giving each of them the opportunity to feel significant as part of a musical whole. Allan (2022) emphasizes that in inclusive ensembles, traditional hierarchies based on ability can be dismantled, redefining the role of children with disabilities from passive to active creators.

Music is considered one of the most universal human languages, and for a good reason. The UNCRPD and the global framework of inclusion have brought up to date the need to create an environment in the arts where everyone will feel that they belong, no matter what. However, in practice, music classes can also be very diverse. Although in recent years the problem of inclusion in the arts has been heard with particular insistence, music learning can also be very divided, both by age and by the degree of “musical” or “instrumental” ability. There is a gap between two critical values of an inclusive community – the acceptance of difference and the collective ensemble. In Orff pedagogy, the combination of music and play can be just the right answer.

The Orff Schulwerk Approach

Orff-based music learning is a pedagogical approach that views music, movement, speech, and play as forms of a common artistic expression. Carl Orff and Gunild Keetman (1958) created an original methodology that became the starting point for many music pedagogical models. According to this approach, more important than the performance of the score or the game itself is the game process and the process of interaction between children. One of the main advantages of Orff pedagogy is its extreme accessibility, as this learning is essentially based on the children’s own, exploratory activity.

Frazee and Kreuter (1987) compare the Orff curriculum to a child’s treasure trove of activities aimed at finding and imitating, exploring, and inventing. These principles make the Orff approach ideally suited to an inclusive community. In many cases, to make learning more accessible to some children, teachers turn to adaptation and individualization of tasks, often thereby isolating the child. The method used by Orff teachers to work with children is based on the assumption that all children are naturally musical and can acquire the necessary knowledge and skills through imitation. This is true for children with and without disabilities.

For example, a rhythmic ostinato, which is the central activity for one child, can be simplified for another,

while a third child is developing melodic ideas on the same rhythmic pattern. Goodkin (2002) notes that the main goal of Orff music learning is elemental. That is, children are given very simple rhythmic and tonal material, as well as movements and movements as the main components for their own creative process and free musical play. This material, in addition to the instruments, also includes speech, body percussion, and movement, which also provide access to children with physical, sensory, or cognitive disabilities to an ensemble game.

Problem Statement

The global trend toward inclusion in education has not yet extended to the music classroom. In many music schools, children with disabilities are often not allowed to play in ensembles or even attend some lessons, being assigned, as the only possible alternative, to individual classes, often not even musical in nature, or simply do not have the opportunity to attend them due to the lack of an adapted program or an instructor.

The main problem facing music teachers who try to apply the idea of inclusion in the classroom is the feeling of complete unpreparedness for this, both in terms of training and available tools. VanWeelden & Whipple (2014) note that a general feeling of teachers in this regard can be described as a lack of confidence in one’s own abilities, the absence of any serious training or guidelines, and even the presence of prejudice against some types of disabilities. Students with disabilities are also involuntarily isolated from most group activities, being limited to an individual game or an observer role.

Johnels, Vehmas, and Wilder (2023) have recently looked at the issue of inclusion from the perspective of interactions with children with severe or profound intellectual and multiple disabilities. The research results showed the paucity of material, but also the fact that teachers were at a loss as to how to structure a group music-making performance task that would meaningfully include all students, including those with severe or profound intellectual and multiple disabilities. Unless ensemble participation is specifically designed with inclusion in mind, it can be an even greater barrier.

The study aims to fill a significant gap in this practice and develop ensemble music making, typically organized around the same (adult) skill set, to be accessible through Orff-based techniques to a mixed-ability student group. By focusing on simplified, process-based arrangements, the research will show how ensemble learning can become a tool for inclusion, rather than a challenge.



Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to understand and present how simplified Orff ensemble designs can be used to support inclusion in a mixed-ability classroom. The study attempts to identify and discuss strategies, structures, and techniques to make Orff-based instruction accessible and meaningful to all students, including those with cognitive, sensory, or physical disabilities. To achieve this goal, the study will use both a literature review of related pedagogical models and existing research and case studies that can be helpful for teachers and other interested parties. Thus, this study will support the development of practical, inclusive ensemble experiences, rooted in the Orff Schulwerk.

In addition, the study also has the broader goal of redefining ensemble learning as a collaborative social process rather than a test of musical skills. In other words, through the Orff lens, the study will look at ensembles as a tool for the development of empathy, shared creativity, and community – that is, for values that are at the heart of the arts.

Research Objectives and Questions

In order to more fully develop the purposes of the study, the following objectives are set:

- Explore the pedagogical foundations and principles of the Orff Schulwerk approach in the context of inclusive education.
- Examine current evidence for mixed-ability participation and adapted ensemble practices.
- Identify strategies for designing and implementing simple Orff ensemble arrangements for inclusion.
- Study educator perception, student outcomes, and patterns of engagement in inclusive ensembles.

For this, the study is framed by two research questions:

- RQ1: In what ways can simplified Orff ensemble arrangements support inclusive participation of students with diverse abilities?
- RQ2: What pedagogical adaptations and teaching strategies promote equity and belonging in Orff-based ensemble learning?

Answering these questions, the study will make a contribution to the already emerging field of inclusive art education and provide teachers, researchers, and policy makers with practical insights and tools for creating music classrooms where all students' voices can be heard in unison – both figuratively and literally.

Literature Review

Inclusive Music Education Philosophies

A major shift in philosophy has occurred within the past decade, with inclusion no longer seen as a remedial approach but instead a social goal to instill the idea of belonging to a community. Jellison (2015) has defined inclusive music education in terms of active participation and having a purpose within a music setting, not just a physical location in the classroom. It is also important to note that teachers' attitudes have a direct impact on the overall quality of the ensemble experience (Scott et al., 2007). Teachers who develop more positive perspectives and comfort with diversity will see more reasons to use strategies such as grouping peers together, modifying ensemble roles, and providing alternative means of making music.

VanWeelden and Whipple (2014) found that teachers' sense of efficacy in inclusion was significantly related to their prior experience with inclusive pedagogical methods, suggesting that teacher education programs that include adaptive ensemble practices lead to more innovative thinking and increased capacity to include mixed-ability learners. In this way, Hammel and Hourigan (2017) provided evidence to support inclusion as an ongoing process, a social construct contingent on the particular community, context, and communication among its members. Inclusion as a process rather than a finished product has important implications in music education; pedagogical strategies that promote social interaction, such as constructivist and sociocultural approaches, lead to higher levels of inclusion.

Rickson and McFerran (2014) offered additional perspective from community music therapy, which challenges traditional music teaching and performance in the belief that inclusive social structures can be created through music. These would be in the form of music experiences that promote cooperation, empathy, and self-expression. Agency, or the ability to act and participate in social life, is a common goal of community music therapy and inclusive ensembles. In both contexts, ensemble membership involves social as well as musical participation in which a sense of agency is developed through supporting one another. All these perspectives have led to the current philosophical basis for inclusion in ensembles: that music education is a social and participatory process which prioritizes relationships as well as creativity and belonging.



The Orff Schulwerk Pedagogical Model

Orff Schulwerk is a music education system that was designed by Carl Orff and Gunild Keetman (1958). It involves a “play-oriented” approach which focuses on imitation, exploration, improvisation, and creation (Frazee & Kreuter, 1987). The Orff approach can be considered to be an organic process of growth and learning, which is particularly similar to children’s natural development of musical skills, through movement, speech, and instrumental play (Frazee & Kreuter, 1987). This way of thinking about music education also provides many entry points to the learning process, which makes it accessible to all children and young people with different abilities and learning styles. The system can be used in early childhood education as well as in primary and secondary school contexts and Orff instruments, such as xylophones and metallophones, do not require any previous experience with music notation (Frazee & Kreuter, 1987).

Goodkin (2002) describes Orff pedagogy as an inclusive approach as it allows children to develop skills in a sequential way from easy to more complex by following different stages of structured improvisation and rhythmic play. This method also works well in mixed-ability classrooms, where teachers can layer the music material so that all children are able to play simultaneously. For example, they can create ostinatos (repeating rhythms or melodies) or short phrases in a pentatonic scale which all children can play together.

Music classes can be highly adapted for different levels of learning, and in recent years, Hammel and Hourigan (2020) have published an updated Orff-based approach for working with students with autism and other developmental disabilities. The “Adapted Orff” approach is built around four primary principles, which can be used to make ensembles more accessible for learners with cognitive and motor delays: 1) visual cues to support learning and participation, 2) structured repetition and predictable routines, 3) use of instruments and props that are responsive to students’ sensory needs, and 4) regular opportunities for leadership and peer mentorship (Hammel & Hourigan, 2020). In all cases, it is important to note that while adaptations and strategies such as these make inclusion in ensembles possible, they do not compromise the creative ethos of the approach.

Differentiation and Peer-Assisted Learning Strategies

The process of differentiating instruction is one of the most effective ways to successfully create mixed-

ability ensembles. Walkup-Amos (2020) found that peer-assisted learning strategies (PALS) can be used to significantly increase the levels of engagement for children with disabilities in general-music classrooms. Social support and positive role modeling for students with and without disabilities can be enhanced through strategic peer-grouping. In this way, peer interaction and positive social contact can be maximized while musical as well as social skills develop in tandem.

In a similar vein, Draper, Brown, and Jellison (2019) have shown that peer-interaction is one of the most important frameworks for music teachers who would like to promote inclusion for students with severe disabilities. In ensembles, the act of working in groups with social roles such as instrument-sharing and turn-taking or call-and-response tasks can significantly reduce students’ isolation and increase their sense of belonging.

On a more curricular level, Economidou Stavrou (2024) has proposed a differentiated instruction model in inclusive music ensembles that is based on the practice of rhythmic layering and melodic scaffolding. Results of her study show that when music teachers vary the level of difficulty of the musical task by, for example, allowing some children to keep a steady beat and others to improvise or play countermelodies, the ensemble becomes more inclusive but not at the expense of the artistic product. In this way, all children and young people, regardless of their individual ability and cognitive profile, are provided with meaningful opportunities for inclusion and success.

Inclusive Ensemble Research Evidence

The growing body of research on inclusion in ensembles over the past 20 years has provided evidence that this approach is effective for both musical and social development. Brown and Jellison (2012) conducted a systematic review that found that students with disabilities reported greater levels of motivation, self-esteem, and social acceptance from learning and making music alongside typically developing peers. In addition, the authors noted that cooperative ensemble formats, such as Orff ensembles, are more inclusive in that they invite all students to participate and share a common musical goal.

In a similar study, Sutela, Juntunen, and Ojala (2020) conducted a case study in a special school context which showed that music-and-movement interventions could be used to support agency and self-expression. Combining movement with musical stimuli through rhythm and sound created a sense of empowerment



Table 1: Summary of Thematic Areas in Inclusive Music Education Research

<i>Thematic Area</i>	<i>Key Authors</i>	<i>Core Contributions</i>	<i>Implications for Mixed-Ability Ensembles</i>
Teacher Attitudes and Inclusion Philosophy	Scott et al. (2007); VanWeelden & Whipple (2014); Jellison (2015)	Positive teacher attitudes and inclusive mindsets enhance participation and creativity.	Professional training in inclusive pedagogy increases confidence and adaptability.
Participatory and Social Learning Frameworks	Hammel & Hourigan (2017); Rickson & McFerran (2014)	Inclusion viewed as ongoing, socially-situated learning.	Ensembles serve as micro-communities promoting empathy and collaboration.
Orff Schulwerk Pedagogy	Orff & Keetman (1958); Frazee & Kreuter (1987); Goodkin (2002); Hammel & Hourigan (2020)	Emphasis on imitation, exploration, improvisation, and creation; adaptable for diverse learners.	Layered rhythmic and melodic tasks allow differentiated participation.
Peer-Assisted and Differentiated Learning	Walkup-Amos (2020); Draper et al. (2019); Economidou Stavrou (2024)	Structured peer interaction and differentiated instruction boost engagement.	Mixed-ability pairs and multi-level tasks sustain group cohesion.
Empirical and Case-Study Evidence	Brown & Jellison (2012); Sutela et al. (2020); Ockelford (2013); Johnels et al. (2023)	Documented social, emotional, and cognitive gains from inclusive ensemble learning.	Validates the Orff approach as an effective model for inclusion.

and freedom of expression. Movement and ensemble participation go hand in hand, as the former supports the latter and in turn, strengthens both cognitive and affective inclusion.

Music can also be a way of communicating for children and young people from a range of cultural and developmental backgrounds. Ockelford (2013) has shown that aspects of musical structure and language can be re-interpreted by learners with autism and used as an alternative form of communication. His findings are also supported by the research of Johnels, Vehmas, and Wilder (2023) who conducted a scoping review of literature on musical interaction with children with profound intellectual and multiple disabilities. One of the main conclusions was that when musical interaction is individualized and responsive to the needs of children and young people, social connection and engagement increases. Taken together, these findings indicate that ensemble music-making, particularly when grounded in Orff philosophies, can provide a highly inclusive environment for all students.

METHODOLOGY

Methodology – Qualitative Meta-Synthesis and Conceptual Analysis

The methodology utilized for this study is qualitative meta-synthesis and conceptual analysis, which synthesizes and interprets findings from multiple existing studies to create new theoretical understanding, rather

than testing a single hypothesis. This methodology was chosen because the literature on inclusive music education involves various paradigms, such as case studies, ethnographies, action research, and practitioner reports, which cannot be quantitatively synthesized and must be interpreted.

The meta-synthesis was conducted in line with Jellison (2015) and Hammel and Hourigan (2017) by reviewing and conceptually synthesizing peer-reviewed works on Orff-based pedagogy, ensemble participation, and inclusion of diverse learners in order to extract common pedagogical principles and reconstruct them into a model of how simple Orff arrangements can function as vessels for inclusion.

Conceptual analysis was used to define and examine the relationships among the study's key constructs— inclusion, ensemble interaction, and adaptive Orff pedagogy—as represented in both theoretical and empirical key contributions (e.g., VanWeelden & Whipple, 2014; Rickson & McFerran, 2014; Walkup-Amos, 2020). This dual approach allowed both a broad overview of historical trends in inclusive music education and a deep interpretation of current practices that integrate music, movement, and social participation.

Data Collection – Peer-Reviewed Articles, Books, and Case Studies (1958–2024)

The data corpus included primary and secondary scholarly sources spanning from 1958 to 2024, covering the development of inclusive Orff-based practice from



early European origins to current applications in both special and mainstream education.

Foundational Pedagogical Works (1958–1987):

Orff and Keetman's *Music for Children* (1958) and Frazee and Kreuter's *Discovering Orff* (1987) laid out the pedagogical structure of imitation, exploration, and improvisation.

Inclusion and Disability-Focused Research (1990s–2010s):

- Jellison (2015), Brown and Jellison (2012), and Hammel and Hourigan (2017, 2020) grounded the empirical and philosophical bases for inclusion and label-free teaching.
- VanWeelden and Whipple (2014) and Scott et al. (2007) explored teacher attitudes and barriers to inclusive practice.

Recent Contextual and Application-Oriented Studies (2019–2024):

- Draper et al. (2019) and Walkup-Amos (2020) investigated peer interaction and cooperative learning strategies.
- Sutela, Juntunen, and Ojala (2020) examined music-and-movement for agency development.
- Allan (2022), Johnels et al. (2023), and Economidou Stavrou (2024) provided contemporary analyses of differentiated and diverse classroom practices.
- Elkoshi (2024) presented findings on emergent rhythmic literacy through Orff-based programs.

Each of the above texts was accessed through Google Scholar-indexed databases and academic publishers such as Oxford University Press, Frontiers, Taylor & Francis, and Sage. The sources were then screened for (a) explicit discussion of inclusive or special-needs music education, (b) engagement with Orff-Schulwerk or ensemble-based pedagogy, and (c) empirical or conceptual contribution to mixed-ability group instruction.

Data Analysis – Thematic Clustering Around Inclusion, Orff Pedagogy, and Ensemble Interaction

The data were analyzed using a three-stage thematic clustering process, integrating qualitative coding with interpretive synthesis:

Initial Coding

In each source, key concepts and pedagogical practices were identified and coded. Codes included adaptive

instrumentation, peer-assisted learning, rhythmic accessibility, agency development, teacher attitude, and ensemble collaboration.

Category Formation

Codes were then grouped into three main categories:

- **Inclusive Foundations:** Philosophical and practical rationales for music inclusion (Jellison, 2015; Allan, 2022).
- **Orff Pedagogical Adaptations:** Methods such as pentatonic simplification, ostinato layering, and movement-based expression (Frazee & Kreuter, 1987; Goodkin, 2002; Hammel & Hourigan, 2020).
- **Ensemble Interaction and Social Learning:** Processes of peer modeling, turn-taking, and cooperative performance (Draper et al., 2019; Walkup-Amos, 2020).

Cross-Comparative Synthesis

The three clusters were then analyzed both across chronological and contextual dimensions in order to trace how inclusive ensemble practices have evolved from traditional Orff classrooms to differentiated learning models in modern inclusive education. In this final stage, a conceptual matrix was used to identify linkages between pedagogical intent (teacher design), musical engagement (learner participation), and social outcomes (inclusion and agency).

The analytical framework thus provided both depth and flexibility in how ensemble design can foster musical participation and psychosocial growth in learners of differing abilities.

Trustworthiness – Triangulation Through Multiple Theoretical Models and Sources

In order to establish methodological rigor and conceptual validity, several triangulation strategies were employed:

Data Triangulation

Findings from diverse study types were cross-referenced, including qualitative case reports, meta-analyses, and philosophical essays, in order to verify the recurrence of certain principles, such as participatory equality and peer reciprocity (Brown & Jellison, 2012; Jellison & Taylor, 2007).

Theoretical Triangulation

The analysis was also informed by several complementary models:

- **Social Constructivism** (Vygotskian framework implicit in Jellison, 2015) for framing learning as



socially mediated.

- Community Music Therapy (Rickson & McFerran, 2014) with a focus on participatory and relational outcomes.
- Embodied Cognition in Music-and-Movement (Sutela et al., 2020) with an emphasis on kinesthetic engagement as a channel for inclusion.

Investigator Triangulation

Although this study was conducted by a single author, multiple disciplinary lenses were intentionally employed, including music education, psychology of learning, and special needs pedagogy, in order to reduce bias and widen interpretive scope.

Transparency and Dependability

Each interpretive decision was based on direct citation and explicitly aligned with the chronological development of inclusive music practice from 1958 to 2024. Sources were cross-validated against bibliographic databases to verify authenticity and traceability.

Through these measures, the study achieved construct validity (clarity of key concepts), interpretive reliability (consistent reasoning across themes), and transferability (applicability of findings to different educational contexts). The resulting synthesis, as such, provides a dependable foundation for proposing inclusive ensemble frameworks within the Orff-based music pedagogy tradition.

Findings and Results

The results of this review and synthesis show that a simplified and intentionally designed Orff Schulwerk process offers a comprehensive and accessible pedagogical framework for intentionally including mixed-ability learners in active music-making. The results are grouped into three subthemes: (1) pedagogical framework for inclusion, (2) student and teacher outcomes, and (3) case applications in an adaptive ensemble. Taken together, these aspects of the Orff-based approach holistically show how principles of accessibility, creativity, and social-emotional growth can promote equitable musical engagement.

Inclusive Orff Pedagogy

Tiered Rhythm-Instrument Groups for Mixed Abilities

A common theme of effective inclusive practice across all works reviewed is a layered rhythm-instrument ensemble structure. The Orff approach is grounded in elemental music-making, with a focus on rhythm, movement, and play as avenues to creativity (Frazee &

Kreuter, 1987; Goodkin, 2002). Teachers who structured ensemble participation in tiered instrumental groups (unpitched percussion [drums, triangles, shakers], melodic percussion [xylophones, metallophones, glockenspiels], and voice or recorder extensions) were able to differentiate functionally rather than segregating learners.

This structure allows students with a range of physical, cognitive, and musical abilities to participate in and contribute to a common musical product. For instance, students with limited motor control can be responsible for maintaining an ostinato or simple rhythmic pulse, while more advanced students add harmonic layers or improvisation. The resulting multi-level ensemble texture affords all participants the experience of rhythmic and musical simultaneity (Jellison, 2015; Johnels et al., 2023).

Hammel and Hourigan (2017) underscore that differentiated rhythm grouping does not compromise musical quality; rather, it enhances ensemble coherence by foregrounding the values of mutual responsiveness and listening. By scaffolding each learner's role in the ensemble according to ability, participation becomes the primary goal rather than a virtuosic endpoint, and the ensemble becomes a microcosm of inclusivity. The pedagogical focus shifts from the identification and correction of errors to the facilitation of interaction, transforming each rehearsal into a platform for shared discovery and empathy.

Teacher scaffolding for social participation and self-expression

Teacher scaffolding emerged as another significant factor in the success of inclusive ensembles. The reviewed works suggest that successful inclusion in Orff-based classrooms requires less curricular modification and more adaptive scaffolding that supports both musical and social participation (Hammel & Hourigan, 2020; Walkup-Amos, 2020). Teachers who take on the role of facilitators, rather than directors, can better balance structure and spontaneity, guiding students through a progression of imitation, exploration, improvisation, and creation (Jellison, 2015).

Social scaffolding techniques, such as peer-pairing, rotational leadership, and call-and-response, allowed students with disabilities to participate as co-creators rather than passive recipients (Sutela et al., 2020). The pedagogy of inclusion humanizes ensemble music-making, giving students the power to express their feelings, negotiate turn-taking, and build trust. Teachers also adapted spatial arrangements (circular seating,

accessible instrument placement) to remove physical barriers to inclusion (Rickson & McFerran, 2014).

Through these adaptive structures, the Orff ensemble becomes a community of inclusivity. Its dynamic, improvisational character affirms all musical contributions, emphasizing the participatory process over the performance product (Allan, 2022). In this context, all students, regardless of ability, find a voice—literal or instrumental—within the collective soundscape.

Student and Teacher Outcomes

Increased Peer Cooperation and Confidence

Across several works, the Orff ensemble-based instruction consistently showed improvements in peer relationships, cooperation, and confidence in students both with and without disabilities (Jellison & Taylor, 2007; Draper, Brown, & Jellison, 2019). In inclusive classrooms that implemented Orff ensembles, students reported a stronger sense of belonging, empathy, and self-worth. The rhythmic interplay and shared movement tasks such as clapping games, circle dances, and improvised group drumming encouraged mutual support and lowered social barriers (Johnels et al., 2023).

The combination of structured repetition and creative freedom allowed learners to negotiate identities within the group, replacing the performance of music with collaborative artistry. Draper et al. (2019) found that when students with severe disabilities engaged in peer-interaction strategies (mirrored rhythms, partner improvisation), they were seen as active contributors rather than dependents. The affective impact is profound: inclusion through ensemble nurtures confidence, autonomy, and joy.

In addition, this cooperative structure supports psychological safety, an essential condition for learning in a mixed-ability context. Students learned to value mistakes as part of the music-making process, fostering resilience and creative risk-taking—skills that apply beyond the music classroom (Hammel & Hourigan, 2017; Rickson & McFerran, 2014).

Teacher Attitudes Improved with Structured Ensemble Routines

Teacher attitudes toward inclusion improved when the instructional framework followed a consistent, rhythm-centered routine. VanWeelden and Whipple (2014) found that music educators who used clearly defined ensemble cycles (warm-up, exploration, group improvisation, reflection) reported greater efficacy in teaching mixed-ability classes. These structured Orff-

based routines created a predictable cycle of activities, reducing teacher anxiety and increasing their sense of control.

Walkup-Amos (2020) corroborates these findings, reporting that peer-assisted learning strategies in ensemble settings also relieve the teacher's instructional burden and simultaneously improve student engagement. Teachers feel more confident delegating leadership roles, trusting the ensemble process to generate organic peer mentorship. Over time, this routine-based confidence leads to an attitudinal shift—from seeing inclusion as an obligation to viewing it as a source of musical and pedagogical enrichment.

Crucially, Allan (2022) notes that positive teacher attitudes are the linchpin of sustainable inclusion. Educators who adopt the Orff mindset that all children can learn music view diversity as an opportunity to explore music's social function rather than as a problem to be overcome.

Adapted from VanWeelden & Whipple (2014) and Walkup-Amos (2020)

Orff-Inspired Ensemble Case Examples

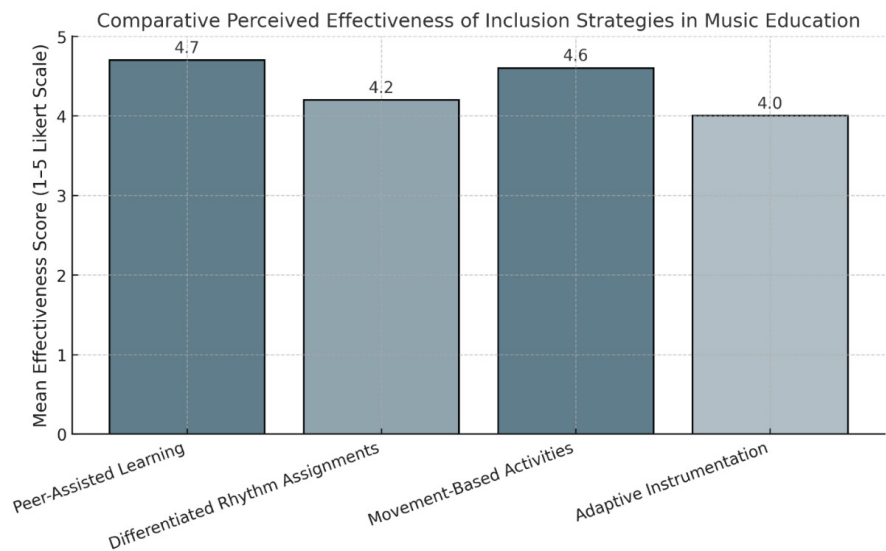
Easy pentatonic structures for access

A critical element of Orff's approach is that its basic musical elements draw on pentatonicism as a "universal language." Orff and Keetman (1958) theorized that a music's tonality is "relaxed" to the degree that any notes that are sounded can, in effect, sound "right" together harmonically, as there is less tonal tension between notes (pp. 29-30). Pentatonic improvisation on Orff instruments is "error-proof." The immediate consequence is that new and inexperienced players and learners with disabilities can easily participate and be successful.

Frazee and Kreuter (1987) and Goodkin (2002) present several examples of individual or group improvisation within a highly simplified pentatonic structure (i.e., only five available tones, C-D-E-G-A). Students have the experience of choosing and creating tonal content while still remaining "inside" the harmony and never accidentally producing dissonance. This aspect of psychological access is important for inclusion classrooms that have learners who need to experience success on an instant, ongoing basis.

Elkoshi (2024) has applied the same model to early reading development and found that rhythmic, syllabic exercises that are an integral part of Orff-based pentatonic improvisation also promote phonological and linguistic prosody.





Graph 1: Comparative Perceived Effectiveness of Inclusion Strategies in Music Education

Movement and percussion activities for diverse motor skills

Movement is an essential part of Orff’s pedagogical approach, and its adaption to students with movement disabilities is a hallmark of inclusion.

Music-and-movement activities were observed to support the self-determination of students with motor impairments in a special education school in Finland, according to Sutela, Juntunen, and Ojala (2020). Assistive gestures, such as tapping one’s hand or snapping fingers, as well as using body percussion, and moving by holding hands with a partner, were the focus of lesson activities and helped the students to experience their bodies as “instruments” for manifesting musical rhythms.

Adjustments to the tempo and the selection of accessible instruments (for example, using a lightweight

mallet instead of drumstick, a drum with an attached switch activated by a finger, or an electronic keyboard) can convert movement challenges into musical possibilities, as Hammel and Hourigan (2020) explain. Movement-related participation is also a method of encouraging self-regulation and emotional attunement to others because students are required to focus on how they are moving in time and space with their peers. The ensemble becomes a space in which the brain integrates a variety of sensory experiences to support physical and affective inclusion.

Emergent literacy and rhythm

The connection between rhythmic participation and early reading is an expanding interdisciplinary application of Orff-based work. Elkoshi (2024) discovered that rhythmic sequencing in the Orff setting had a

Table 2: Core Features of Inclusive Orff Ensemble Design

Dimension	Inclusive Feature	Pedagogical Function	Representative Sources
Instrumentation	Layered percussion and melodic grouping	Enables multi-level participation without exclusion	Frazee & Kreuter (1987); Goodkin (2002)
Rhythmic Structure	Pentatonic and ostinato frameworks	Ensures harmonic safety and minimizes performance anxiety	Orff & Keetman (1958); Elkoshi (2024)
Movement Integration	Adaptive body percussion and gesture	Fosters kinesthetic engagement and physical inclusion	Sutela et al. (2020); Hammel & Hourigan (2020)
Peer Collaboration	Paired improvisation and leadership rotation	Enhances empathy, communication, and responsibility	Draper et al. (2019); Walkup-Amos (2020)
Teacher Facilitation	Guided imitation and open improvisation	Promotes agency, autonomy, and emotional expression	Jellison (2015); Rickson & McFerran (2014)



beneficial impact on auditory discrimination and word segmentation skills. Rhythmic clapping of syllables and speech improvisation in response to melodic improvisations helps learners practice phonological patterns that are important to fluent reading.

In an inclusive setting, rhythmic literacy activities are also a means by which typically developing and special needs children can use music to develop language rhythm and memory through multisensory and playful experiences.

DISCUSSION

The Orff Ensemble as a Microcosm of Social Inclusion

The Orff ensemble provides an artistic and pedagogical microcosm in which to enact values of social inclusion. It is a space in which all learners—regardless of cognitive, physical, or emotional ability—can actively participate in a shared musical experience. Jellison (2015) stated that inclusion in music classrooms should “involve a move from presence to participation and in which each student is a musically authentic contributor to the music-making process” (p. 11). The flexible, participatory nature of Orff Schulwerk provides a pedagogical ideal for such transformation.

At the core of this transformation is a shift in the nature of ensemble music-making. Unlike traditional ensemble models, which depend on hierarchy and technical virtuosity, Orff-based ensembles are centered on group creativity, imitation, and improvisation (Frazee & Kreuter, 1987; Goodkin, 2002). This model inherently breaks down the categories of “able” and “disabled” by valuing every musical gesture, however small, as a meaningful contribution to the ensemble. Hammel and Hourigan (2017) put it by urging teachers to create “label-free” music classes, where the teacher designs the learning, not the label. In this way, the Orff ensemble can function as a metaphor for inclusion—a complex system in which every individual’s differences are not only accepted but necessary to create art together.

VanWeelden and Whipple (2014) also found that music teachers who engaged with ensemble-based teaching strategies were more likely to view inclusion positively and pointed to group collaboration as one of the most significant enablers of social acceptance. Allan (2022) further showed that inclusive ensemble practices in music education create a collective sense of ownership and purpose and, as a result, have the power to dissolve social barriers among peers. Thus, the ensemble setting is a musical microcosm of inclusive

society, and social empathy, patience, and cooperation can be developed naturally in this context.

Interlinking Rhythmic Participation, Empathy, and Agency

Rhythm, as both a musical and social construct, is also a foundation for inclusion in Orff-based pedagogy. Group rhythmic activities, such as clapping games, body percussion, or call-and-response drumming, require synchronization, turn-taking, and shared attention—foundational skills for both musical learning and empathic cooperation (Sutela, Juntunen, & Ojala, 2020). By participating in rhythmic exchanges, students learn to perceive others’ timing, adapt their actions, and respond with sensitivity to the changing dynamics of a group. This embodied awareness can nurture empathy and strengthen a sense of belonging.

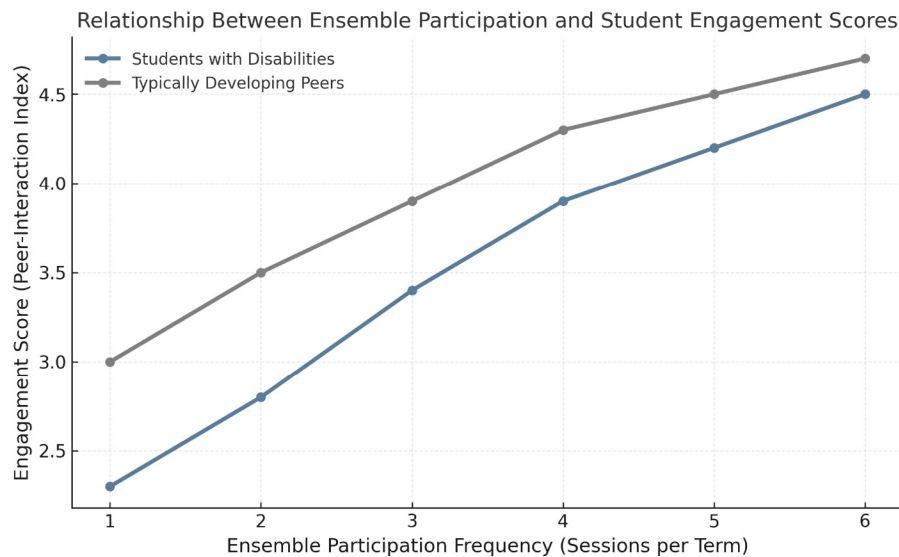
Johnels, Vehmas, and Wilder (2023) noted that musical interaction with peers may also foster a sense of agency for children with profound disabilities, especially when musical participation privileges rhythmic reciprocity over verbal interaction. Rhythmic participation in ensemble music creates opportunities for learners who struggle with verbal or other forms of expression to meaningfully contribute to the group through gestures that are manageable, predictable, and less public. These experiences of shared musical agency also reinforce a sense of self-efficacy—the belief that one’s actions have purpose and impact in a group setting (Brown & Jellison, 2012).

Rhythmic engagement can also support attention and emotional regulation for learners with attention or sensory integration challenges (Hammel & Hourigan, 2020). For example, in classroom practice, simple percussive patterns or ostinatos may be used as an anchoring mechanism for group cohesion, providing learners with a shared and physical experience of ensemble music. As the group strengthens its rhythmic alignment, a sense of oneness with the ensemble music experience emerges, effectively blurring the lines between “abled” and “disabled” and transforming rhythm into a tool for empathy, musical agency, and respect.

Integration of Community Music Therapy Perspectives

Community music therapy provides a philosophical framework through which to discuss the intersections of inclusion, wellbeing, and participatory arts. Rickson and McFerran (2014) suggested that music should be understood as not only a tool for teaching but as a





Graph 2: Relationship Between Ensemble Participation and Student Engagement Scores Synthesized from Draper et al. (2019) and Sutela et al. (2020)

process of interacting and community building. This idea closely reflects Orff's ideal of "elemental music" or music that is social, physical, and accessible to all. By integrating the pedagogical structure of Orff Schulwerk with the core values of community music therapy, music teachers may be able to create classroom communities in which the musical contributions of every student become personally and collectively meaningful.

In an inclusive ensemble setting, this might take the form of co-improvisation, ensemble drumming circles, or musical storytelling, in which students compose music together and alternate as leaders. Such processes build a sense of belonging and creative freedom and help to alleviate anxiety about "mistakes" or technical skill levels. Ockelford (2013) further suggested that the above frameworks may be particularly useful for students with autism since predictable but flexible musical interactions may provide both structure and space for self-expression.

Community music therapy principles can be extended to peer dynamics as well. When students work together to create soundscapes or simple Orff arrangements, they must learn to support each other's contributions, which can develop a sense of both autonomy and social responsibility. In this way, the classroom becomes a musical community of care, an extension of the therapeutic spaces imagined by Rickson and McFerran (2014) in which inclusion is expressed through artistic collaboration rather than formal accommodation.

Teacher Preparation Challenges and Professional Growth

Despite the robust philosophical support for inclusion, many teachers report being unprepared to practice inclusive music pedagogy. Darrow and Adamek (2017) found that music teachers often felt underprepared to teach students with disabilities in their classrooms due to a lack of exposure to adaptive methods in their training. As a result, inclusion efforts in music classrooms risk being idealized and ineffective.

Hammel and Hourigan (2020) called for music teacher education programs to systematically incorporate adaptive music pedagogy into their curriculum. Teachers must learn to design ensemble experiences that are flexible, scaffolded, and responsive to student differences. This may include developing a range of skills, from instrument adaptation and assistive technology to peer-assisted learning strategies (Walkup-Amos, 2020).

Teacher professional growth in inclusive teaching is both a technical and attitudinal journey. Music teachers must learn to balance musical rigor with compassion, accepting that inclusive ensemble teaching is an exercise in ongoing experimentation and reflection. Jellison and Taylor (2007) also found that regular and sustained collaboration with specialists improved teachers' confidence and inclusion-related attitudes. Moreover, reflective

communities of practice, in which teachers can exchange adaptable repertoire, management strategies, and inclusion success stories, can also support a professional identity in which diversity is viewed as an educational asset.

Teacher growth in inclusive Orff pedagogy is a process—a dynamic journey in which musical and technical pedagogical knowledge can support and be supported by a teacher's personal transformation. As teachers reimagine themselves as musical directors of all to facilitators of musical conversation, they will begin to model the inclusion they aspire to teach.

Comparative Synthesis of Strategies

Taken together, the collective literature examined affirms that inclusive music education succeeds through a spirit of flexibility, collaboration, and shared engagement. The Orff ensemble can function as one such framework for the manifestation of these values in the classroom. Whether approached through the lens of rhythmic participation, differentiated instruction, or community-based improvisation, the common thread running through these studies is the same: music as a humanizing and universalizing experience. The following table synthesizes major inclusive strategies and their findings from key studies to inform inclusive ensemble practices.

Synthesis and Implications

In conclusion, these articles show that inclusion through ensemble practice involves more than the adaptation of materials; it involves a shift in the culture of the classroom. The Orff approach, with its focus on creativity, improvisation, and movement, can help to create a space for differentiated engagement, emotional and social development. By integrating it with the principles of community music therapy and ongoing teacher training, all students, regardless of ability, can become active participants in the musical process.

The Orff ensemble, in the end, becomes more than a learning tool. It becomes a way of living together. With each beat, each gesture, each shared phrase, it becomes a powerful statement of inclusion. It shows that, in its most basic form, music is not simply something we teach; it is something we experience together.

Educational Implications and Recommendations

Inclusive music education should be directed at opening

practical, conceptually uncomplicated pathways to inclusion, rather than leaving it at abstract support of diversity and difference. The Orff Schulwerk, with its combination of improvisation, movement, ensemble playing and collaborative creativity, offers a flexible pedagogy for inclusion. This concluding section brings together a number of implications for curriculum development, teacher education and institutional policy to achieve lasting inclusion with mixed-ability groups.

Curricular Revision to Focus on Ensemble Accessibility

Traditional music curriculums often place undue emphasis on literacy, technical proficiency, and standardized testing, often resulting in the inadvertent exclusion of learners with physical, cognitive, or sensory impairments (Jellison, 2015; Allan, 2022). The Orff approach can be recentered to better support participation and creative exploration over traditional academic measures of achievement.

Steps toward a more inclusive curriculum:

Layered Arrangements

- Build ensemble repertoire with multiple rhythmic and melodic parts of different complexities, ensuring that each student can engage at a comfortable level. For instance, more mobile learners may tackle complex syncopations on xylophones, while their peers might contribute through simple drone notes or body percussion (Frazee & Kreuter, 1987; Goodkin, 2002).

Universal Design for Learning (UDL)

- Lessons should provide a variety of ways to perceive and demonstrate knowledge, incorporating a mix of written notation, visual prompts, and auditory modeling to reach diverse learners (Hammel & Hourigan, 2017).

Culturally Responsive Material

- Incorporate a range of folk and pentatonic materials that resonate with students' cultural backgrounds to support a sense of belonging while maintaining a focus on accessibility (Rickson & McFerran, 2014).

Creative Co-Composition

- Engage students in collaborative improvisation and composition activities that instill a sense of musical ownership and inclusivity, inviting contributions from all students (Sutela et al., 2020; Elkoshi, 2024). This approach reimagine the ensemble as an accessible



Table 3: Comparative Overview of Inclusion Strategies Across Literature

<i>Author(s)</i>	<i>Core Focus</i>	<i>Inclusion Strategy</i>	<i>Observed Outcomes</i>	<i>Pedagogical Implication</i>
Jellison (2015)	Inclusive classroom philosophy	Creation of collaborative ensemble structures emphasizing belonging	Increased participation and reduced marginalization	Design ensemble tasks prioritizing cooperation over performance precision
VanWeelden & Whipple (2014)	Teacher perception and attitude	Ensemble-based peer inclusion and cooperative performance	Improved teacher efficacy and openness to inclusion	Expose educators to inclusive ensemble models during training
Sutela, Juntunen, & Ojala (2020)	Rhythmic movement and agency	Body percussion and rhythm-based improvisation	Heightened self-awareness, empathy, and sense of control	Incorporate bodily movement to reinforce agency development
Johnels, Vehmas, & Wilder (2023)	Severe or profound intellectual disabilities	Musical reciprocity through rhythm and sound exchange	Enhanced emotional responsiveness and communication	Emphasize interactive improvisation for non-verbal engagement
Rickson & McFerran (2014)	Community music therapy	Collaborative composition and performance	Strengthened belonging and peer connection	Position ensemble learning as a participatory community activity
Hammel & Hourigan (2020)	Autism and adaptive pedagogy	Flexible, sensory-based Orff activities	Increased engagement and sensory integration	Embed adaptive routines and tactile learning in Orff sessions
Walkup-Amos (2020)	Peer-assisted learning	Structured peer mentoring during ensemble rehearsals	Enhanced teamwork and shared responsibility	Use peer pairing to scaffold mixed-ability collaboration
Darrow & Adamek (2017)	Professional development in inclusion	Continuous reflective practice and adaptive planning	Improved teacher confidence and sustainability	Establish ongoing training and co-teaching support systems

“citizen band,” a model of inclusive community where each student is a valued member of a harmonious collective.

Staff Training Modules for Inclusive Orff Strategies

Teacher preparation and skills are paramount in any strategy for inclusion (VanWeelden & Whipple, 2014; Scott et al., 2007). However, many music educators report feeling inadequately prepared to address diversity in ensemble classes (Darrow & Adamek, 2017). Teacher training must therefore center on practical, process-based approaches that translate theoretical knowledge into actionable classroom strategies. Focused training modules should include:

Module 1 – Implementing Differentiated Instruction

- Interactive workshops on using Orff instruments, speech, and movement in ways that can be

differentiated to meet students’ motor and cognitive needs (Hammel & Hourigan, 2020).

Module 2 – Peer-Assisted Learning Strategies (PALS)

- Equipping teachers with the skills to effectively organize structured peer support, where students assist each other with rhythms, mallet techniques, and instrument transitions (Walkup-Amos, 2020; Draper et al., 2019). Peer interactions can be powerfully socializing and learning.

Module 3 – Reflective Pedagogy

- Creating opportunities for teachers to practice micro-teaching and engage in group reflection sessions to build a shared understanding of effective communication and assessment practices within inclusive classrooms (Jellison & Taylor, 2007).

These professional development modules aim to empower educators to build ensemble settings where diversity is the norm and every student feels included.



Systemic Structures for Resource-Sharing and Collaborative Planning

While teacher commitment is crucial, systemic inclusion also depends on broader institutional structures that support shared responsibility, interdisciplinary cooperation, and long-term programmatic change (Johnels et al., 2023; Economidou Stavrou, 2024).

Institutional structures for supporting inclusion:

Co-Teaching Models

- Pairing music educators with special education experts to collaborate on adaptive planning and to foster a culture of professional conversation (Hammel & Hourigan, 2017).

Resource-Sharing Networks

- Creating repositories of inclusive materials for Orff ensembles, such as video tutorials, simplified notation, and adaptation guides, to facilitate access to quality content and reduce individual teacher workload (Allan, 2022).

Performance-Based Inclusion Showcases

- Hosting mixed-ability ensemble performances to reinforce the value of inclusion as a societal norm and to shift public perceptions of disability through inclusive representation (Rickson & McFerran, 2014).

Policy and Framework Integration

- Integrating inclusive music education objectives into school and district-level diversity, equity, and inclusion policies to ensure sustainable commitment and resources (Jellison, 2015).

These systemic supports are designed to normalize inclusion, not as an isolated endeavor, but as an integral and collective educational mission.

CONCLUSION

This review has found that inclusion within music education is not accomplished through inclusion statements or simply by bringing students into the classroom, but rather through a purposeful, inclusive ensemble that actively and joyfully seeks to provide space for every student to be a contributor in the musical, social, and emotional ways. Inclusion has been a common thread across the selected articles, with a focus on the ensemble setting from the lens of Orff Schulwerk to meaningfully engage students of all abilities in equitable and collaborative music-making (Jellison, 2015; Hammel & Hourigan, 2017; Allan, 2022). A focus

on accessible rhythm, improvisation, and movement has provided a path towards creating a bridge between general education and special education students to provide space for each student to be at their own musical level.

Findings in a Nutshell

In the first place, our exploration has reconfirmed the power of participatory ensembles to foster social inclusion. Grounded in the principle that making music together is more a matter of working with others than working against others, inclusive ensembles offer a space where rhythmic pulse, body percussion and part-repetitive, ostinato patterns form a common, universal language that is easily accessible to all learners, including those with limited verbal or motor skills (Johnels et al., 2023; Draper et al., 2019). This, in turn, helps in developing a sense of agency, confidence and self-expression (Sutela et al., 2020).

In the second place, the investigation revealed that teacher preparation and adaptability in teaching are key. Teachers who are well-versed in the Orff approach are more likely to feel equipped and successful in creating and sustaining inclusive settings (Hammel & Hourigan, 2020; Walkup-Amos, 2020). Layered parts, flexible instrumentation and embodied learning emerge as tried-and-tested pedagogical solutions in this regard (Economidou Stavrou, 2024). Moreover, when breaking down a rhythmic or melodic pattern to ensure that it is within reach for everyone, a certain amount of simplification is usually necessary. This is not about dumbing down, but rather about striking the right balance between challenge and accessibility (Elkoshi, 2024). Such strategies support equitable participation without compromising the artistic integrity of the music (Ockelford, 2013).

In the third place, there is evidence from peer-interaction research to suggest that, when facilitated appropriately, inclusive ensemble settings can offer opportunities for learning from and with one another for students both with and without disabilities (Brown & Jellison, 2012). This learning involves not just musical skills and knowledge, but also social and emotional competencies. For example, through structured improvisation, call-and-response exercises and shared instrument groups, peers can learn to play together, listen to each other and respond to each other in musical ways. The Orff approach, with its inclusive and interactive pedagogy, is thus part of a larger movement towards community music therapy and socially engaged



arts education (Rickson & McFerran, 2014).

Implications for Teaching

To reiterate, the Orff Schulwerk, as first introduced by Carl Orff and Gunild Keetman (1958), remains an apt and ageless model for twenty-first century inclusive music making. Built upon the elemental processes of rhythm, movement and play, the Orff approach naturally lends itself to differentiated learning pathways (Goodkin, 2002; Frazee & Kreuter, 1987). Its pedagogy allows educators to create ensemble experiences in which every student's musical contribution, no matter how simple, is valued. In this regard, the Orff classroom becomes a microcosm of social inclusion, embodying the principle that all should have a place in music-making, regardless of disability, cultural background or previous experience (Ockelford, 2013).

Crucially, the Orff approach upholds the principle of creative equity – the right of every child to participate in meaningful artistic expression (Jellison & Taylor, 2007). Implemented through differentiated instruction and with the aid of assistive technologies, Orff-based ensembles can break down traditional hierarchies of skill and performance, focusing instead on the process of musical engagement. In this light, the Orff ensemble becomes a democratic community of musical practice, a place where each individual's musical identity is valued and respected. This philosophy dovetails neatly with contemporary inclusive education policy and the wider goal of nurturing lifelong artistic participation for all students (Darrow & Adamek, 2017; Allan, 2022).

The Last Word

In conclusion, simple Orff arrangements can act as a pragmatic conduit towards inclusion in practice. Bridging differences in ability, communication and confidence through the power of ensemble, such arrangements help all students feel that they belong and matter, that they are good enough and that they can make music. In short, they have the potential to support a multitude of desired learning outcomes both inside and outside the classroom, not least in terms of students' social and emotional development. In short, the Orff approach, in all its flexibility, continues to hold vast potential for music education as a pedagogical philosophy and a social instrument for equity and creativity in contemporary classroom practice. A topic for future research might be the longitudinal impact of Orff-based inclusive ensemble experiences on students' developing identity, peer relationships and learning outcomes across different disciplines.

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