Ensemble Music for Social and Emotional Development:

A Case Study of Primary School Children in a Suburban Malaysian Chinese Community

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Abstract

Music forms part of the Malaysian national curriculum for primary education, but music education is often compromised by low community interest, resulting in children's under-exposure to musical training. This qualitative study examines the inclusivity, creativity, and sustainability of a community-initiated children's choral-instrument ensemble established as an after-school, weekly activity in suburban Malaysia, where members were recruited from lower- to middle-income families, and had little means to pursue music otherwise. Data were collected from class observations, children's "before-after" drawings, and semi-structured interviews with the stakeholders. The trustworthiness and validity were ensured through inter-rating, member checks, and data triangulation. The findings revealed that the program transformed children with little knowledge of music into confident musicians capable of performing both local and classical genres, including rearranged renditions of Palladio and Dikir Barat within a year. It suggests that well-facilitated ensemble-based musical instruction sustains the positive development of social and emotional skills in children.

Keywords: *Choral Music, Children's Instrumental, Suburban, Malaysia, Creativity, Inclusivity*

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Introduction

Music courses are part of the Malaysian national curriculum for primary education. However, in an interview with the New Straits Times' journalist, music professors like Dr. Ramona Tahir of Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) and Dr. Mohd Hassan Abdullah from Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris (UPSI) both expressed their concerns that Malaysian society does not foreground music education. The latter also commented on the lack of awareness in Malaysian society about the importance of music education at a young age (Mustafa, 2018). While choral music may still be rehearsed in communal and religious programs, orchestra music is generally perceived as an elitist performance and easily dismissed (Bailey & Davidson, 2005; Rastam, 2021).

Today, the importance of music is emphasized by UNESCO (2019) to promote inclusion, prosperity, and positive change as can be seen from related projects, for example, the Music as a Driver for Sustainable Development Project in Morocco (2018) and World Day for Cultural Diversity for Dialogue and Development (12 May 2021). Music is a universal language of cohesion, embodying the power of living heritage to unite humanity around shared values and aspirations. Noel Curran, Director General of the European Broadcasting Union (EBU) delineated the direction of 'music diversity' to "inspire audiences daily by showing how natural intercultural connections can be" (EBU, 2021). These projects highlight UNESCO's mission of inclusion advocacy in the World Conference on Education for All to Meeting Basic Learning Needs (UNESCO, 1990), which aims to provide education to all children regardless of their disabilities and with differing abilities.

Choral music educators are urged to reframe educational practices to offer solutions that support music learning for all students (Fuelberth & Todd, 2017). The effort to make ensemble music available for school children to facilitate social and emotional development is crucial for Malaysian society. The inclusivity of music education is also at stake. This study thus seeks to uncover the benefits experienced by the members and stakeholders of a community children's choral-instrument ensemble in the northern region of Malaysia. The children's ensemble was established by a visionary educator who chose to offer choral and orchestral instrument training to interested primary children in his community at affordable fees. Fee waivers were given for children from the bottom 40% (B40) income families.

Literature Review

Music and art can connect people on a deeper level, including their power to create a sense of unity and community (Binson, 2020). Research reveals great emotional, social, and cognitive benefits of group singing and performance, even for the homeless and marginal (Ibid). Apart from its conventional and classical functions to entertain, create aesthetical values, and provide pleasure and relaxation (Levinson, 2024), ensemble music also asserts ethical and educational power in shaping virtue and character (Whitfield, 2010). More importantly, when one engages in music and language, there is a 'mysterious' benefit to the human brain. As Larbib argues, the human brain "can produce and perceive complex hierarchical structures which interweave form and meaning, appreciating each as enriched by the other" (Larbib, 2013, 7).

To note, an ensemble is formed when a group of supporting musicians, singers, dancers, or actors perform together. When two or more people make music together, there are ample opportunities for participants to display group creativity and integrate multiple skills (D'souza, 2019). In the process of creating and advancing new ideas, music ensembles build

a community of inclusivity, receptivity, equity, and celebration (Webster, 2002). When the choir members or an instrument ensemble meet regularly to make music together over some time, social relationships are formed naturally. Members become familiar with each other's communicative behavior (Aucouturier and Cannonne, 2017; Bishop, 2018; Moran et al., 2015). Likewise, when performers across traditions adjust their playing to accommodate new group formations and performing environments, they complement each other's imperfections such as missed notes, attentional lapses, or missed repeats (Glowinski et. al., 2016). Music, along with its embedded messages, is therefore perceived as essential to man's survival and development whereby the nurturing nature of music illumines one's mundane life, edifies and sustains a person's life on earth from the ecological viewpoint (Sloan and Harding, 2021; Titon, 2009). Moreover, local music culture plays a vital role in preserving the history and cultural heritage of ethnic groups. Phongnil (2023) points to the power of music performance in facilitating the interplay between community, environment, and technology, and making the participants move as one body. Pongsarayuth (2023) ascribes sound and melodies as powerful agents for interpersonal communication, thus, enhancing mental health and the quality of life of music participants.

Based on the above literature review, D'souza's (2019) emphasis on group creativity in skills integration, and Webster's (2002) concepts of inclusivity and equity are deemed the most important criteria that underpin this study on a choral-instrument ensemble. An initial conceptual framework for the study is as follows:

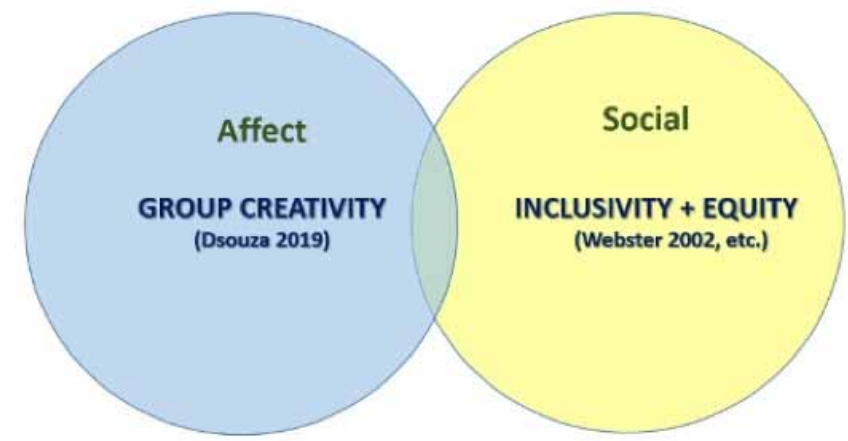

Figure 1. The initial framework for community choral or music ensembles from the literature review.

In Malaysia, the Ministry of Education has made music a compulsory subject in Malaysian primary schools since 1983 (Abdullah, 1990). There were ups and downs in the implementation of music curriculum in the primary schools, due to the changes of emphasis in Malaysia's national educational interest. Meanwhile, the Standard Curriculum for World Music was introduced to facilitate a multicultural, integrated curriculum in 2011 (Wong, Pan, & Shah, 2015). In 2020, the Science, Technology, Reading, Arts and Music (STREAM) was introduced as the Secondary School Standard Curriculum (KSSM), with three elective music course subjects namely the "Music Theory & Aural Skills," "Musical Instruments," and "Computer music" for interested students (Landau & Dermawan, NST, Nov. 30, 2019).

Holistically, these developments reflect the desire to cultivate musical talents, creativity, and inclusivity and to provide Malaysian children with exposure to a wide range of world music genres (Wong, Pan, & Shah, 2015). However, there have been concerns about whether

Malaysian schools have enough expertise to teach music courses (NUTP president Aminuddin Awang in NST, ibid). Moreover, despite the provision in the curriculum, music has rarely been emphasized in Malaysian schools. The 30-minute music class per week in the primary classrooms teaches very basic rhythmic recognition, basic singing, and the recorder (Ismail et. al., 2021) which seems inadequate for developing musical skills among children. Malaysian parents who are aware of the importance and benefit of music education would have enrolled their children at private music education centers or paid home-based private tutors to teach their children to play the instruments of their choice. However, these private lessons which usually involve one-on-one teaching or small group teaching are expensive. Unfortunately, not all parents can afford to pay for musical instruments needed for the practices and for the years of private music lessons for their children that take years. These considerations prompted the present study which examined the roles of a community choral-instrumental group for Malaysian school-aged children over the pandemic period when schools were forced into lockdown mode. The study examined the children's experiences and aspects related to creativity, inclusivity, and sustainability. The views of the children's parents were also explored. Reflections on the future planning of the ensemble are included.

Methodology

The present study employed full qualitative research methods, i.e., semi-structured interviews, observation, and analysis of children's drawings about their ensemble experience. The research site was a town in the northern region of Peninsular Malaysia. The weekly ensemble practices were normally conducted at the ensemble director's house, and their community court when more space for practice was needed. The research samples were recruited through purposive sampling. The ensemble director was first contacted, and the rest of the target interviewees were approached through referral by the director, and after getting their consent. 10 out of 12 ensemble children who met the inclusion criteria were interviewed in groups of two or three and in the presence of at least one of their parents. A parental consent form for each child was also obtained. Parents who were interviewed also signed their respective consent forms.

The inclusion criteria for children interviewees were simple: Children around primary school age (6 -12 years old), with or without a music background, living in the Kampar Baru neighborhood who were committed to participating in the weekly 2-hour ensemble programs for at least a year, and considered a full ensemble member by the group. Children below or above primary school-aged who are not part of the Kampar Baru community and have difficulty participating in group music practices and performances regularly were excluded from the samples. Two children were excluded as they did not meet the inclusion criteria. The salary bracket of the parents of the ensemble members was not emphasized at the point of recruitment, but it turned out that all except children from two families were from the B40 financial background in this study.

Data were collected through observations on rehearsal and performance videos, analysis of 10 ensemble children's drawings depicting their pre- and post-ensemble experiences, as well as semi-structured interviews with the ensemble members, music instructor, and the director. The reason for choosing to analyze children's drawings as one of the data collection methods, on top of semi-structured interviews with them, was out of the following considerations: First, the drawings of young children give insights into their social and emotional as well as intellectual development, as advised by Farokhi and Hashemi (2011)

who were experienced in research involving children. Second, primary school children of vernacular background might be too shy to speak up, which was the case when they were approached by the researchers. Getting them to draw their ensemble and explain their experience as ensemble members was very helpful for them to express themselves better during the interviews.

The children's drawings were analyzed with reference to guidelines suggested by Farokhi and Hashemi (2011) such as choice of colors, shapes, bold or faint expressions, repetitions and so forth. The elaboration given by the children during their interviews was transcribed verbatim and carefully coded and analyzed. To create a comfortable environment for the interviews, children interviewees were paired in groups of two or three and interviewed for 30-45 minutes in the presence of at least one of their parents via Google Meet or Zoom online platforms. Thematic analysis which requires "analytical sensibility" as reminded by Braun & Clarke (2013) was applied when interpreting the data through the generation of initial codes, categorization of codes, and finally, the development of themes.

In qualitative research, the reliability or trustworthiness of data analysis refers to the consistency of data coding by multiple coders. The discrepancies in codes by different researchers were discussed, modified, rated and agreed upon by the research team by voting. The validity of this qualitative study was ensured by conducting member checks with the interviewees after the records of their inputs were made, peer examination among the research team members, and triangulation of three qualitative methods, involving class observation, analysis of the children's drawings, and semi-structured interviews with the director, teacher, and stakeholders.

Findings

With the consent of their parents, each ensemble member explained the content (representation) of their "before-after joining the ensemble" drawings. The following themes were derived after careful analysis of qualitative data from observation, children's drawings, and semi-structured interviews with the children and their parents:

1. Before-after Experience

Nearly all ensemble members had little musical training at the point of their joining. When attending their weekly ensemble program, they were trained by the teacher and their more talented peers, which will be discussed further in the "Peer tutoring and leadership" subsection. Upon the request of the researchers, the ensemble and parents gave consent for the children to produce drawings about their "before-after" ensemble experience. Their drawings were used during the interview session as conversation starters, and to facilitate the children's elaboration during the interview.

(a) Enhanced social experience: From "unpleasant" individual life to "pleasant" group life

F01, aged 6, learned singing, piano, and violin after joining the ensemble. Her before-after drawing showed her emotional attachment to music at the mention of the ensemble. In the "after" section, she drew a grand piano. Wearing a blue gown, she stood by the piano, and the ambiance was enhanced by special lighting, indicating that she was going to perform. When asked to describe the difference between before joining the ensemble and after joining, she said, "Before, I could only do homework (referring to the picture). After, I can play

piano. I am happy." As a child coming from a moderate-income family, F01 did not have the opportunity to own a grand piano. The imaginary grand piano in her picture was a 5-octave keyboard her parents bought for her after joining the ensemble. During the interview session, F01 further explained that she was "happy" because she had friends to make music together. Her father supported her testimony, adding that whenever he dropped her off at the ensemble practice site, she would leap out of the car excitedly.

Figure 2. 'Before-after' drawing by F01 (aged 6).

Drawings from other ensemble children captured the same tone of enhanced emotional experience, the "social" aspect in their group music-making. The drawings from M05 (aged 10), and F06 (aged 10), for example, showed crying faces (before) and happy faces (after), respectively. Both ascribed their experience to the acceptance of the group: "I got friends there," said M05. Yet another ensemble member M02, aged 7, also drew a sad face (before) and a smiling face (after). Pointing to the speech balloons in his drawings, he explained that: "In the 'before' picture, other people commented my playing was 'not good,' but in the 'after,' I said to myself, 'good.'" He exulted in a sense of pride when saying it.

Figure 3. 'Before-after' drawing by M02 (aged 7).

Before joining the ensemble, M02 briefly learned a musical instrument but could not recall what instrument it was. He said he quit playing that stringed instrument because it hurt his fingers. When he first joined the ensemble, he learned to play the ukulele. Following that, he picked up the violin and fell in love with the instrument again.

(b) New-found interest: From purposeless free time to purpose-driven music practices

Interestingly, these children also expressed the changes in their purposeless free time to music-driven activities in their leisure time. Accordingly, they have also changed their endless browsing of digital devices to music practices, fully motivated by their own interest. Their accounts informed the enhanced "affect" aspect of their participation in their choral-instrumental ensemble. F09, aged 12, described her "before" habits as "lying on the sofa and playing with the cellphone;" whereas her "after" habits were "playing the piano when I am free," and "learning new songs." She recounted she had "never practiced music pieces" on her own before developing her newfound interest in music after joining the ensemble. When asked whether her parents had bought a grand piano for her, she explained, "No, I have a keyboard." So, the grand piano in her picture was a projection and representation of 'piano' being a big part of her world now, just as in the drawing of F01, aged 6.

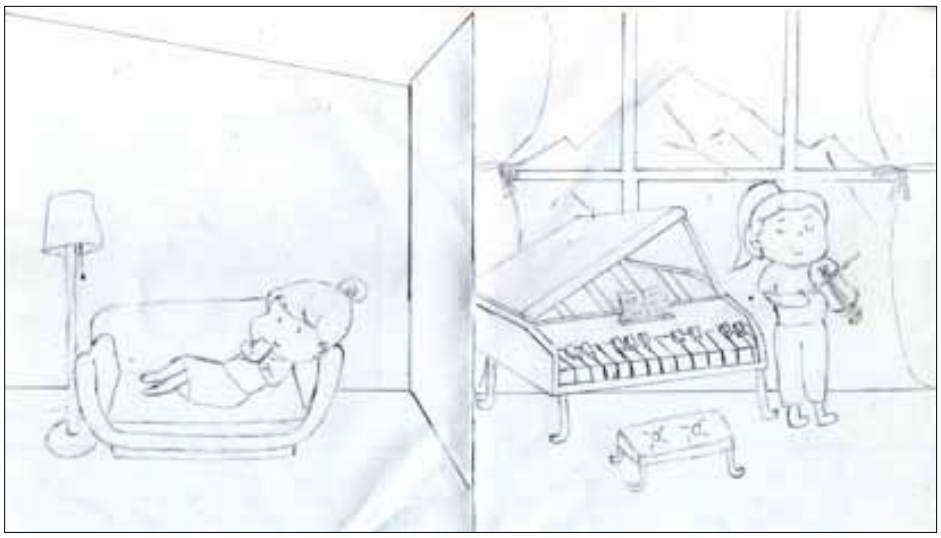

Figure 4. 'Before-after' drawing by F09 (aged 12).

Showing the transformation from attachment to digital devices to a musical instrument, the drawing of M07, aged 10 was one of the most telling. In his "before"' illustration, he had an iPad on one hand, and a cellphone on another, with his thought captions, i.e., "Play!!! Yeah!!!" He also drew a big thought bubble containing a musical stand and a few musical instruments. Each of them was tagged with "No!!!," signaling M07 had no thoughts of playing any musical instruments before joining the ensemble. For the "after" drawing, he showed himself playing the violin, and his teacher who stood beside him, smaller size than him in the drawing, clapped with a speech balloon, "Very good!!!" According to M07, he found himself highly motivated to excel in music after joining the ensemble, "In my free time, I browse the Internet to look for new scores to recommend to the ensemble. I like to play music. I want to be known (for my musical talents)."

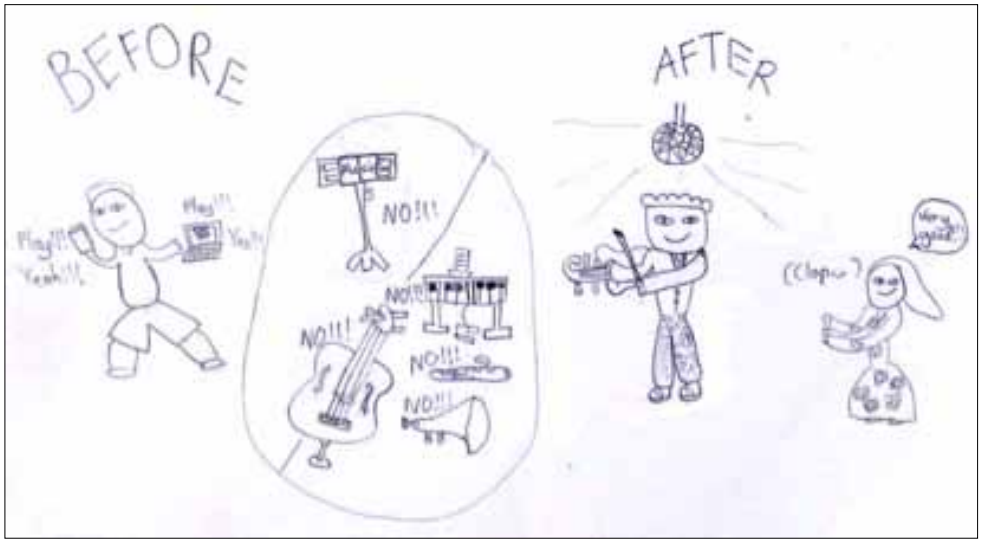

Figure 5. 'Before-after' drawing by M07 (aged 10).

(c) Growing skills: From no musical background to performance-level music literacy

F08, aged 12, and her sister F10, aged 10 showed the researchers their "before-after" illustrations. They drew the picture together.

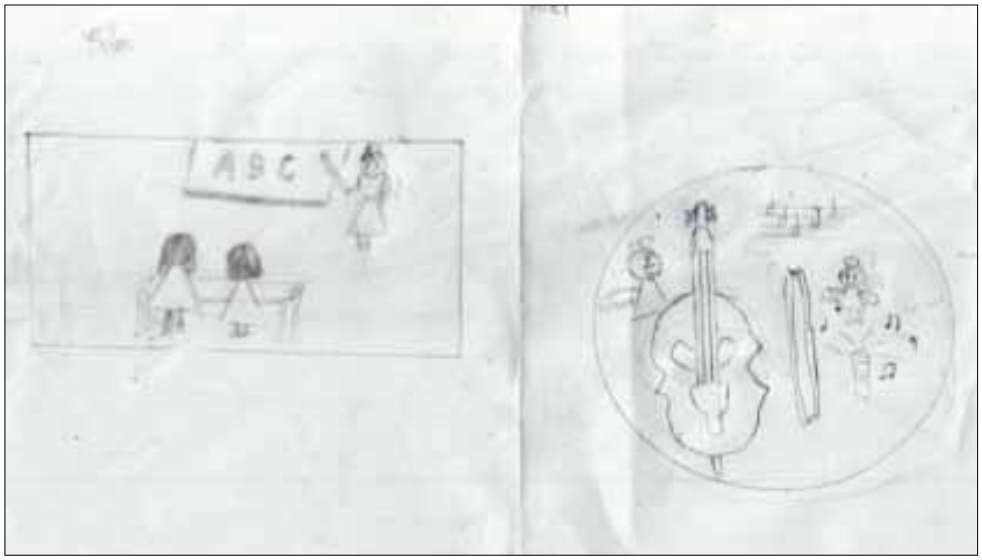

Figure 6. 'Before-after' jointly drawn by F08 (aged 12) and F10 (aged 10).

When asked about their experiences before joining the ensemble, F08 explained that it would be a square shape, simply, going to class and getting home. The "after" experience had much to offer. It is a circle with a violin in the center, and her teacher and the other people within the circle. When probed, F08 explained that the shape was the boundary encompassing everyone involved inside the circle. She said she was only introduced to playing the recorder at school. When she first joined the ensemble, she touched the musical instruments with great caution: "It was my first time touching a violin. I was afraid I accidentally damaged it" (F08).

F08 gradually overcame her anxiety and soaked up musical knowledge like a sponge. She advanced quickly to be the key violinist and viola player in the ensemble. "The teacher is very nice," she smiled saying, "She taught me music, and I can continue to improve it on my own." Agreeing with her, her sister F09 also saw their teachers (referring to the ensemble director and the music teacher) were like "angels." In their drawing, these teachers were dignified with halos and wings, hovering over the violin with musical staff and musical notes.

2. Off-stage and on stage

Several characteristics were observable from the rehearsal and performance videos. The following findings were gathered through video observation and further clarified during the interviews with the ensemble director, music instructor, and the ensemble members.

(a) Peer tutoring and leadership

When the ensemble children were rehearsing or preparing for a performance, it was observed that a lead violinist (M07, aged 10) was always cueing and prompting them to get organized among themselves. He was assuming the role of the Concert Master, as explained during the interview with the Ensemble Director and M07 himself. It is also interesting that this choral-orchestra group acquired some self-organization skills and teamwork skills among the children. Clear leadership and teamwork were certainly displayed in this group, without any prompting from the teachers.

Besides, a peer-tutoring system was also in place. The orchestra members practiced first in their respective sectional grouping, then only in the large group. In general, they were placed in four different "stations." The groups varied from time to time. In general, the stations were run based on musical proficiency. Players of similar proficiency would practice together under the tutelage of their better-skilled member. Weaker members who needed more coaching and those who were assigned soloist roles would be placed under the special care of the music instructor in different stations. Since the budget of the group only allowed one paid music instructor, the instructor would coach by rotation. Interestingly, most of the practicing and tutoring were conducted by peers who developed the skills of other ensemble members.

(b) Community, group synergy, and the 'ecclesia'

During the interview with a member, it was revealed that members looked forward to playing in the ensemble due to the opportunities to socialize with students who had similar interests in music. Several parents and the music instructor also highlighted this factor. Some of the children, missing physical practices, expressed their eagerness for the next session where they can do music with other children again.

> "I miss my friends." (F01, aged 6)

> "My daughter likes the choral group. I have trouble getting her out of the car when dropping her off for school or her childcare. But for the choral group, she can't wait to get out of the car and run in to meet her friends. Haha." (Father of F01)

> "I like going there (the home where the members gather for practice) because I know many friends… After the lockdown, I hope to see many more joining us." (F06, aged 10)

> "The children do not just come to play on the instruments. They enjoy social interaction. They want to meet their friends." (Music Instructor, violin and piano teacher)

For the ensemble, the weekly practice had created a strong sense of togetherness and camaraderie among the children, which was sustained through their one-on-one paired weekly practice.

> "The ensemble is simply a houseful of musical instruments. Besides the instruments, I now have my circle of friends. It's a life-changing experience for me."
> (M07, aged 10)

> "I remember our performance at the hotel. Even though I was feeling slightly afraid on the stage, I am okay playing with my friends up there. Our performance was successful."
> (F03, aged 9)

The togetherness and sense of belonging among the ensemble members were some of the motivating factors for these children to look forward to playing again. The director described this group spirit as the 'ecclesia.' He explained,

> "Ecclesia is a Greek word, meaning 'the gathering of the faithful.' I adopted it as the operating philosophy of the ensemble. as I hope that these kids can grow together and mutually encourage each other well into their adulthood."

The aspiration of the director is likely to materialize as the bond among the students, and their positive development after joining the ensemble was affirmed by a few parents during the interview sessions. e.g., *"I think my son built up his communication and social skills at the ensemble."* (Mother of M02)

(c) Improvisation, choreography and creativity

The music repertoire of the ensemble seemed very rich and inclusive. According to the Ensemble Director, in their past performances, they incorporated Dikir Barat (native Malay group singing), nursery rhymes, movie songs, classical music, and other genres.

The sense of empowerment felt by the ensemble members was palpable during the observations and from the recording of the rehearsals and practices. Members, though very young and had little musical training, were encouraged and entrusted to improvise and choreograph their stage performances. They were given the freedom to interpret musical scores and decide on stage positions and other arrangements as they deemed appropriate.

> "We think of where we want to stand and how we arrange (ourselves)." (M07, aged 10)

The Ensemble Director explained that the ensemble members could alter the flow of the story or songs that they wanted to perform. The rehearsal video showed exciting verbal exchanges among the members, giving their opinions on aspects of their performance. It was rather refreshing to witness that the ensemble children were not instructed to perform in one way or another. Rather, they had a say in what they would like to showcase. In other words, the ensemble members were highly involved in the stagemanship, choreography, and role distribution for each of their public showcases.

The interview with the Ensemble Director revealed that the ensemble members had to practice on their own with given digital cues and do a one-person recording with the Director whenever the lockdown policy loosened slightly for very small group meetings. After getting the recording with each player, the Director had to edit the clips together to produce highly challenging choral and orchestra performances such as Palladio, Pirates of the Caribbean, Heart of Courage, and Ave Verum Corpus.

(d) Music literacy and affordable fees for music learning

Learning as a group somewhat accelerated their musical training despite the lockdowns caused by the pandemic. Music literacy was developed and promoted without straining the children's own will and interest.

> "My private music students in other centers do not learn as fast as this ensemble. There is power in learning in an ensemble like this. I saw how those with no musical background pick up when they feel like they want to do it with their ensemble friends. Some of these children are advancing very fast. They can perform rather challenging musical pieces within a considerable short period of learning time." (Music instructor)

> "I want to learn violin because my sister is there too." (F04, aged 9)

Besides enjoying the comfort of playing as a group, or playing with friends, the use of animated digital apps for members' practices also played a part in developing members' note-reading and performing skills. The children acquired digital literacy skills for reading musical notes through the use of animated apps, which further developed their interest in practicing on their own.

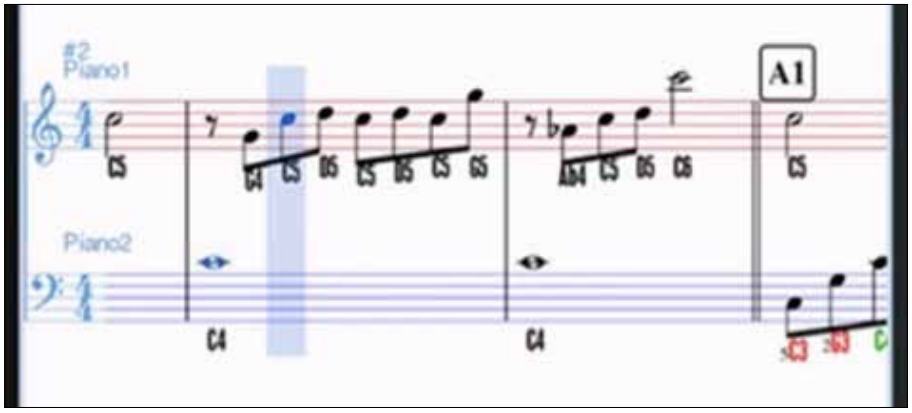

Figure 7. The use of animated 'Musical Chores' for members' practice.

As discussed, one main barrier to learning music was the high cost of private lessons conducted one-on-one and in small groups. One of the most revealing findings of the present study was that learning music through the ensemble was affordable to the parents. During the interview, the mother of F08 and F10 said that the members of the ensemble paid low tuition fees to learn the instruments. The teachers ensured that the fees were kept very affordable to encourage children of low-income and single-income families to join the ensemble and play an instrument. The parent explained that her daughters were paying very nominal fees, and if they had to take private lessons, it would not have been possible

for them to take music lessons. The teachers ensured that musical training was accessible to as many children as possible, following the inclusivity policy of taking children with any or limited musical abilities.

Limitation of the Study

This study is not without its limitations. The sample only consisted of a community children's choral-instrument ensemble in a suburban Chinese community in Malaysia. While the findings of qualitative research cannot be generalized to all populations, some descriptive data may be "transferred" to understand issues or phenomena of similar contexts, as suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985, 298). The transferability of qualitative findings was also discussed by recent researchers including Drisko (2024).

Conclusion & Recommendations

The findings from this case study affirm Binson's (2020) concept of community, Schilling's (2017) idea of music aesthetics, Whitefield's (2010) literary proposition, and Larbib's (2013) cognitive development theory. Moreover, the study supports D'souza's (2019) emphasis on group creativity in music learning, music making, and performance curation, which maintain the vibes, dynamism, and sustainability of the ensemble. In addition, The ensemble director of this case study was practically abiding by Webster's (2002) inclusivity and equity principle, as he continuously offered the program at affordable fees or fees waiver to children from the lower-income families.

The study led to the creation of the following framework for the development of musical skills and the setting up of a musical ensemble in the Malaysian education system. The initial framework for community choral or music ensembles from the literature review (FIG. 1) was modified and refined as follows (FIG. 8):

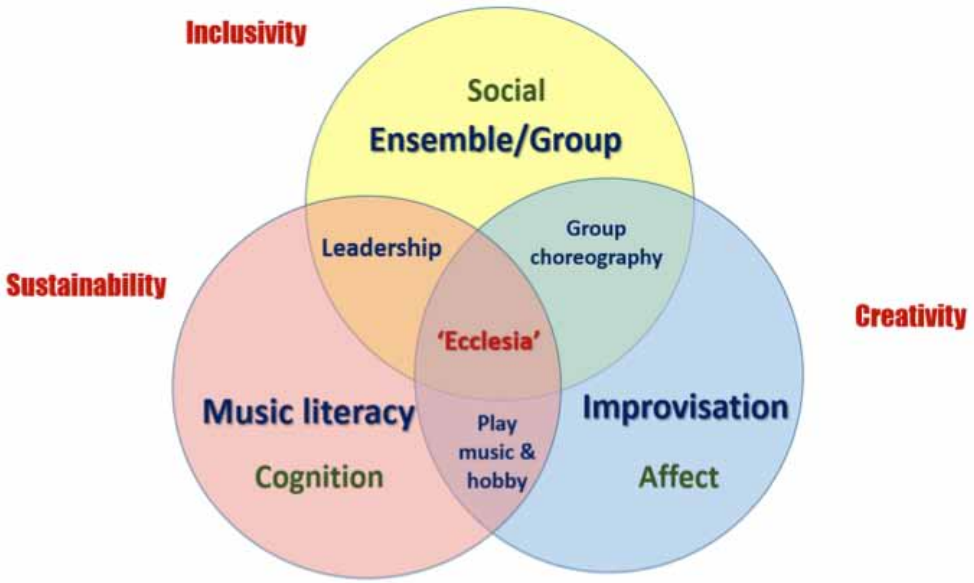

Figure 8. An "Ecclesia" framework of the ensemble deriving from the data findings of the study.

The findings generated by the exploratory study have shown that a musical ensemble is viable as a musical entity that develops a plethora of skills that are often under-developed in classroom settings, for example, creativity, inclusivity, teamwork, and peer mentoring at

a very young age. The mechanism at work, especially the learning environment, freedom, and trust given to members fostered the development of different soft skills in a supportive environment. Group learning is effective, as can be seen from feedback from the members, their performances, and the children's guardians. Being members of the ensemble transformed these children with little knowledge of music into confident young musicians capable of asserting their confidence and performing a variety of choral-instrumental pieces at school and in their local community. The inclusion of local and classical genres such as Palladio, Dikir Barat, and nursery rhymes developed the children's appreciation of music, discipline, creativity, and teamwork. These findings indicate that ensemble-based musical instruction and literacy are not only sustainable, but this form of education also supports the positive development of social and emotional skills in children, and that more ensembles could be formed. While exploratory, this study has provided some directions for developing much musical knowledge and crucial life skills through music making in a children's ensemble outside school contexts and for further research into studies exploring young children's social and emotional development through music.

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