Acta Globalis Humanitatis et Linguarum
ISSN: 3030-1718
Vol. 2, No. 4 (2025): Autumnus 2025

Integrating Music into Curriculum Design: Strategies for Enhancing Student Achievement and Cognitive Skills

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https://doi.org/10.69760/aghel.0250040002

Keywords	Abstract
arts integration music education academic achievement working memory executive function interdisciplinary curriculum cognitive development	This study investigates the effects of integrating music into elementary-level math and language arts instruction over 12 weeks. Sixty students were divided into experimental and control groups; only the experimental group received music-enhanced lessons. Academic tests and working memory assessments were administered before and after the intervention. Results showed that students exposed to music-integrated teaching outperformed controls in standardized tests—especially in mathematics—and demonstrated significantly improved working memory. Teacher interviews highlighted increased engagement and effective use of mnemonic songs. These findings suggest that incorporating music into curricula can support both academic achievement and cognitive development. Broader implementation and further research are encouraged.

Introduction

Music has occupied a prominent role in education throughout history. In classical antiquity and the medieval era, music was one of the four core liberal arts in the *quadrivium* (alongside arithmetic, geometry, and astronomy), reflecting a belief that musical understanding was essential to a well-rounded intellect. As educational paradigms evolved, so did the place of music in formal curricula. By the 19th century, pioneering educators such as Lowell Mason had successfully advocated for music instruction in public schools – in 1838, Mason established the first public-school music program in the United States (Boston), legitimizing music as a subject in the general curriculum. This historical inclusion of music set the stage for ongoing debates on its educational value.

In recent decades, there has been growing interest in **interdisciplinary trends** that integrate arts with other subjects. The emergence of **STEAM** (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts,

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Mathematics) education exemplifies this movement. By infusing creativity and artistic modes of learning into scientific and technical subjects, educators aim to enhance engagement and innovation. Music, in particular, has been used as a tool to reinforce learning in domains like mathematics and language. For example, clapping rhythms or singing songs can help teach numerical fractions and grammatical rules, capitalizing on music's mnemonic power and its motivational appeal. These interdisciplinary approaches are grounded in the idea that music-making stimulates multiple modalities (auditory, visual, kinesthetic) and can create richer neural connections during learning.

Insights from the **cognitive neuroscience of music and learning** provide a theoretical rationale for music-integrated pedagogy. Neuroscientific research has shown that musical training can lead to structural and functional brain changes that support learning and memory. Children who undergo instrumental music training exhibit enhanced development of auditory and motor areas of the brain. Notably, a longitudinal study by Habibi et al. found that after two years of music training, children not only improved in musically relevant auditory skills but also showed stronger brain activation in regions supporting executive functions during a cognitive inhibition task. This occurred even when behavioral measures of executive function showed no immediate differences, suggesting that music may **prime the brain's cognitive networks** in ways that are not immediately reflected in test scores. Such findings align with other studies indicating that music training engages attention, working memory, and inhibitory control – the core components of executive function. The *"high demands on listening, attention, and controlling behavior during the music learning process may facilitate domain-general executive functions,"* as posited by Hannon and Trainor (2007). This perspective is bolstered by evidence that musically trained children often outperform their non-trained peers on tasks of language processing, memory, and attention.

Despite promising findings, there remain **research gaps** in understanding the causal impact of music when integrated into standard classroom instruction. Much of the existing literature has focused on extracurricular music lessons (e.g. private instrument instruction or school band) and their correlation with cognitive or academic outcomes. Meta-analyses reveal mixed results: some report small-to-moderate overall effects of music training on skills like memory and intelligence, while others argue these effects diminish under more rigorous experimental control. For instance, Talamini et al. (2017) found medium effect sizes for short-term memory ($g \approx 0.57$) and working memory ($g \approx 0.56$) in musicians versus non-musicians. In contrast, Sala and Gobet (2017) concluded that many benefits of music on cognition might be attributable to pre-existing differences or placebo effects, especially when random assignment is considered. This inconsistency points to a gap: few studies have implemented *randomized controlled trials within actual school settings* to test whether integrating music into teaching can *cause* improvements in academic performance or cognitive abilities. Moreover, qualitative aspects – such as teacher and student experiences with integrated curricula – are less commonly documented.

Purpose of the study: In light of this background, the present study aims to investigate the impact of systematically integrating music into elementary school curriculum on student achievement and cognitive skills. We focus on a short-term (12-week) intervention embedded in core subjects (mathematics and language arts) to explore two main questions: (1) Does music-integrated instruction enhance students' academic outcomes (e.g. math and reading test scores) compared to traditional instruction? (2) Does it improve cognitive functions such as working memory and attention, as measured by standardized tasks? Additionally, we examine teacher perspectives on the intervention to understand practical implications, advantages, and challenges of implementation. By combining quantitative measures with qualitative insights, this study seeks to contribute comprehensive evidence on whether integrating music into daily lessons can be a viable strategy to boost student achievement and cognitive development.

Literature Review

Music, Brain Development, and Cognitive Neuroscience in Youth

Neuroscientific studies have provided compelling evidence that active engagement with music during childhood and adolescence can shape brain development. Musical training is a multisensory activity that demands fine motor skills, auditory discrimination, pattern recognition, and emotional interpretation – essentially a "full-brain workout." Research using neuroimaging has shown that children who undergo music training exhibit structural brain differences in areas related to hearing, motor control, and memory. For instance, Hyde et al. (2009) conducted MRI scans in young children before and after 15 months of piano training and found significant increases in the volume of motor and auditory brain regions compared to control children. These changes corresponded with improvements in fine motor skills and melody/rhythm discrimination, suggesting that *music training drives neuroplasticity in developing brains*. Over longer periods, music may even influence interhemispheric connectivity: the corpus callosum of musically trained individuals has been reported to be larger or more robust, potentially due to the bimanual coordination and complex sensorimotor integration that music practice entails.

Functional brain measures also highlight music's impact. Longitudinal work by Habibi et al. (2018) tracked children engaged in an *El Sistema*-inspired music program versus control groups (one with sports training and one with no training). After two years, the music group did not outperform others on behavioral tests of executive function, yet they showed stronger neural activation in prefrontal regions during an inhibition task. This finding implies that *music training may enhance the brain's executive networks even before behavioral changes manifest*. In other words, music could be "preparing" or strengthening cognitive control circuits that might translate into academic or life skills over time. Other studies have indeed found behavioral correlations: musically trained children often display superior performance on verbal memory and literacy tasks (e.g. larger vocabulary, better reading ability) compared to non-trained peers. Chan et al. (1998) provided early evidence of a link between music and memory, reporting that adults with music

training had significantly better verbal memory (learning of word lists) than those without such training. Follow-up research with children showed similar results – music training was associated with improved verbal memory (words and stories), though notably not with visual memory. Ho et al. (2003) found that children given music lessons showed gains in verbal recall that exceeded those of control groups over a year, lending support to the idea that music particularly augments language-related memory.

Music's effect on **attention and executive function** has also been investigated. Because playing music requires sustained focus, inhibition of irrelevant stimuli, and constant updating of working memory (for example, remembering a sequence of notes or adjusting performance in real time), researchers hypothesize that these demands could exercise domain-general executive skills. Several behavioral studies support this hypothesis. For instance, in tasks measuring selective attention or task-switching, musicians often outperform non-musicians. One study found that 9–12-year-old children with music training scored higher on tests of **auditory attention and processing speed** than their peers. Similarly, longitudinal interventions have reported improvements in **working memory** among children receiving music instruction. In a randomized study in China, Nie et al. (2022) assigned elementary students to a music training, a second-language training, or no training group for one year. The music group showed significantly greater gains on a backward digit-span task (a common working memory measure) than both comparison groups. Interestingly, the advantage was specific to the *complex* aspect of working memory (manipulating information in reverse order) rather than simple short-term retention. This finding reinforces the notion that music training benefits the **central executive** component of working memory – the part responsible for mental manipulation and updating – more so than the basic storage component. It aligns with other reports that the *digit span backward* tends to improve more than digit span forward in music groups, indicating enhanced executive processing.

Despite these positive trends, the literature is not unanimous. Some meta-analyses have questioned the magnitude and consistency of far-transfer effects from music to general cognition. In a comprehensive review, Sala and Gobet (2017) argued that when controlling for pre-existing differences (such as socio-economic status or baseline IQ), the overall effect of music training on non-musical cognitive abilities is small ($d \approx 0.1–0.3$) and sometimes statistically non-significant. Furthermore, they and others have cautioned about publication bias and the need for more rigorous experimental studies (as opposed to correlational designs). An updated systematic review of 29 studies by Rodriguez-Gomez and Talero-Gutiérrez (2022) noted *heterogeneity* in methods but concluded that music training does appear to confer benefits to core executive functions, *"primarily in inhibitory control, and to a lesser extent, in working memory and cognitive flexibility."*. This suggests that certain aspects of executive function (like self-control and selective attention) are most susceptible to improvement through music, whereas others (like abstract reasoning or fluid intelligence) might not be as strongly affected or may require longer training.

In summary, the cognitive neuroscience and psychology literature supports a cautiously optimistic view: *learning music engages neural and mental processes that can bolster some cognitive skills (especially memory and executive function) in children and adolescents.* However, the degree of benefit and its translation to academic achievement is influenced by factors such as the intensity and duration of training, the nature of comparison groups, and the outcomes measured. These insights set a foundation for exploring music's role within the classroom – moving beyond isolated music lessons to **music-integrated curricula**, which is the focus of our study.

Academic Outcomes of Music-Integrated Learning

Research on integrating music into general education (rather than teaching music as a separate subject) has gained momentum, reflecting a broader shift toward arts integration. One key question is whether blending music with academic content can improve learning outcomes in those content areas. **Mathematics** education has been a notable testing ground for music integration. A recent meta-analysis spanning almost 50 years of studies found a clear pattern: incorporating music into math instruction tends to boost math achievement. In this meta-analysis (Akin, 2023), integrated music-math lessons had the largest effect on student performance – about 73% of students exposed to music-integrated math outperformed those who received no musical intervention. This effect size was larger than that for students who had music lessons separate from math (around 58% outperforming controls) or those who learned an instrument without integration (69% outperforming). The integrated approach likely works by *making math more engaging and concrete*: abstract concepts (like fractions or ratios) are taught through musical rhythm and melody, which provide relatable analogies (e.g. fractional note lengths in a measure). Students often find math less intimidating and more enjoyable when it involves musical games or songs, leading to reduced anxiety and improved attitudes toward math. Over the long term, better attitudes and increased motivation can translate into higher achievement. Importantly, the meta-analysis noted that these benefits were strongest for arithmetic skills and younger learners, suggesting that early elementary arithmetic is particularly amenable to music-infused teaching.

Beyond math, **reading and language arts** have also been linked to music integration efforts. The relationship between music and language development is well-documented – they share processing of sound, rhythm, and syntax in the brain. Some intervention studies have attempted to use songs and rhythmic activities to improve literacy skills. For example, "academic music" programs have been designed where children learn phonics or vocabulary through song. One study with kindergarteners found that those who received a music-infused reading curriculum had more positive attitudes toward reading and comparable literacy gains to those in traditional instruction. In that study, while reading **achievement** (test scores) did not significantly differ between the music-integrated group and the control group after an 11-week program, the music group showed **significantly higher enthusiasm and interest in reading**. Teachers reported that students were excited to participate and often continued singing the literacy songs outside class. This points to a

potential indirect benefit: music integration may increase student **engagement**, which is a known predictor of long-term academic improvement. Indeed, engagement and enjoyment are sometimes prerequisites to achievement gains – if students are more invested in learning, they may practice more and pay closer attention, eventually leading to better performance.

Another area of academic integration is using music to aid **memorization of content** in subjects like science, history, or foreign languages. Educational psychologists have explored **musical mnemonics** – for instance, putting multiplication tables or historical facts to a tune. Studies have shown that information presented in musical form can be recalled more accurately than spoken information, because melody and rhythm provide an extra scaffolding for memory. Knott and Thaut (2018) demonstrated this in a controlled experiment where one group of children learned a list of words through a simple song and another group learned them through spoken repetition. The music group not only recalled more words immediately, but also retained them better after a delay, performing significantly higher on delayed recall. The authors concluded that *"training of verbal memory using musical mnemonics has a pronounced effect on both overall recall and serial order, and is superior to training with spoken word."*. Such evidence suggests that teachers can leverage songs for teaching sequences (like the letters of the alphabet, which is traditionally taught with the Alphabet Song) or ordered lists (like the planets or steps of a process). The strong rhythmic and melodic cues in music might help encode the order of information in memory more effectively than verbal cues alone.

Case studies of music-integrated programs provide practical illustrations of these benefits. One prominent example is *El Sistema*, a Venezuelan-origin social program that immerses children (often from disadvantaged backgrounds) in intensive, collaborative music-making (primarily orchestra). While El Sistema's main goals are social development, researchers have examined academic and cognitive outcomes among its participants. A study of El Sistema-inspired programs in low-income schools in England found that after one to two years, participating students showed *improved verbal reasoning, non-verbal reasoning, and numeracy scores* compared to their baseline, and relative to non-participants. Osborne et al. (2016) reported that children involved in extended music ensembles demonstrated gains in visuospatial reasoning and a trend toward better standardized math and language scores, though these academic improvements were more evident in one of the two schools studied. Additionally, significant **psychosocial benefits** were observed: teachers noted increased confidence, teamwork, and resilience in the music students. These outcomes underscore that music integration (in this case, as an extracurricular but school-supported program) can have multi-faceted positive effects. The cognitive challenge of learning an instrument and performing in an ensemble may sharpen mental skills, while the cooperative and motivational aspects spill over into general school engagement.

Another case is the *Kodály method*, which is a pedagogical approach to music education focusing on singing, folk music, and movable-do solfège. While Kodály is primarily a method for teaching

music literacy, its principles have been applied in general classrooms. Research on Kodály-based interventions suggests they can especially aid young children's **phonological awareness and listening skills**, which are foundational to reading. For example, in a preschool study, children who experienced daily Kodály singing games showed greater improvement in distinguishing speech sounds and in early literacy measures than those who did not. The Kodály approach's emphasis on gradual, sequential learning and integration of movement (through singing games) aligns well with how children naturally acquire language. However, comprehensive evaluations of Kodály programs on broad academic achievement are scarce. A feasibility trial in the UK (2018) attempted to measure the effects of a Kodály-inspired music curriculum on 4–5-year-olds' literacy and math outcomes over one year. The results indicated small gains in reading for the music group, but these were not statistically significant by the end of the year. More notable were improvements in **social-emotional development** – the music sessions significantly enhanced children's enjoyment of school and classroom behavior. The authors suggested that a longer duration or more frequent music integration might be needed to yield academic skill boosts, whereas benefits to soft skills and attitudes appear earlier.

In summary, integrating music into academic learning has shown **promising outcomes**: improved test scores in math (especially arithmetic), potential gains in language-related skills, better memory retention via musical mnemonics, and enhanced student motivation and classroom atmosphere. Yet, the magnitude of academic improvement can vary. The literature suggests that integration is most effective when it is *intentional and sustained*, aligning musical activities closely with the target academic concepts (e.g. using rhythmic notation to teach fractions) and maintaining the practice over time. Additionally, music's impact may be more immediately visible in engagement and cognitive processes than in high-stakes test scores. Given these insights, our study builds on prior work by implementing a purposeful music-integrated curriculum and measuring both academic and cognitive outcomes, as well as gathering teacher observations to contextualize the quantitative results.

Music's Effects on Memory, Attention, and Executive Function

A wealth of research connects music training with improvements in **memory, attention, and executive function**, which are key cognitive skills underlying academic learning. As noted earlier, musical activities place demands on working memory (holding and updating musical phrases), sustained attention (practicing and performing pieces), and executive control (suppressing errors, adjusting tempo, etc.). This section delves deeper into specific findings and theoretical underpinnings regarding these cognitive domains.

Memory: Musical engagement can enhance various types of memory. *Working memory* (the ability to temporarily hold and manipulate information) is often highlighted. Studies using digit span tests (forward and backward) consistently find advantages for musically trained children. For example, one study reported that 10-year-olds who had received 1–2 years of private music lessons

outperformed their non-musical peers on both auditory and visual working memory tasks. Notably, differences were larger on complex memory tasks (like backwards span or n-back tasks) than on simple span tasks. This implies that music training particularly bolsters the capacity to *process* and organize information, not just store it. The mechanism may involve enhanced attentional focus and chunking strategies learned through music (musicians often learn to group notes or lyrics meaningfully, which is analogous to chunking in memory). Longitudinal evidence supports causality: in a study by Roden et al. (2012), children were given 18 months of either music training or a control activity, and only the music group showed significant gains on working memory tests over time (with the greatest gains in tasks requiring both storage and processing). On the other hand, **long-term memory** (especially for verbal material) also appears positively influenced by music. Mechanistically, learning music might train verbal encoding through lyrics and enhance auditory memory via repeated practice and memorization of pieces. A meta-analysis by Talamini et al. (2017) found that across 37 studies, musicians had better long-term memory on average than non-musicians (with a small effect size $g \approx 0.29$). While modest, this effect was reliable, suggesting music's memory benefits extend beyond the immediate working memory realm.

The use of *music as a mnemonic device* has shown that even short-term musical interventions can improve memory for specific content. One notable experiment taught one group of children new vocabulary as songs and another group the same words through spoken drills. The song group not only learned the words faster but retained them better after one week. Brain imaging during recall hinted that the musical rhythm provided an external timing structure that aided retrieval, activating fewer cognitive resources to recall each item (since the melody cued the next word). This illustrates that music can offload some memory workload by providing melodic and rhythmic cues – effectively serving as a **cognitive scaffold**. Teachers intuitively use this technique (think of how many educational TV programs incorporate songs for alphabets, numbers, or scientific facts). The difference research makes is in quantifying the impact and optimizing the approach (e.g. what kind of melody works best, how often to repeat the songs, etc.).

Attention: Focused attention and monitoring are critical both in music and academic settings. Musical training has been associated with enhancements in attentional control. Neuroscience studies by Strait, Kraus and colleagues have shown that musicians have superior ability to tune out background noise and focus on target sounds. In one such study, musically trained adolescents were better at detecting slight differences in tone amid background noise, reflecting sharpened auditory attention – a skill directly relevant to classroom listening. Another facet is *sustained attention*: learning an instrument often requires children to practice concentrating on sometimes repetitive exercises for longer periods, potentially stretching their attention span. A review of behavioral studies concluded that children with music training tend to have longer and more stable attention during cognitive tasks than those without training. This likely contributes to the academic domain by helping students stay on task during lessons or exams. Indeed, a study in the U.K. found that primary students who received additional music workshops showed improved concentration

levels in class (as rated by their teachers) compared to a control group, even though their test scores did not differ significantly in the short term. This suggests attention might be one of the first domains to improve with music engagement, potentially preceding measurable academic gains.

Executive Function: As the cognitive control umbrella, executive function (EF) includes inhibitory control (self-regulation), cognitive flexibility (task-switching), and working memory (already discussed). Several studies indicate that music training can enhance EF in children. Degé et al. (2011) provided evidence that the well-known IQ advantage of music lessons may be *mediated by executive functions*. In their study, 9- to 12-year-olds with music training outperformed controls on tasks of inhibition and cognitive flexibility, and when those EF differences were accounted for, the direct association between music and IQ disappeared. This means music's effect on general intelligence might operate through improving the efficiency of executive processes that facilitate learning across subjects. Another study by Zuk et al. (2014) compared adult musicians and non-musicians and found musicians had enhanced performance on multiple EF tasks, including task-switching and verbal fluency, alongside distinct neural activation patterns in frontal regions. Although that study was cross-sectional and in adults, it hints at long-term strengthening of executive circuits through years of musical practice.

The question of causality in EF is complex – children predisposed to better EF might be more likely to stick with music. However, some randomized interventions support a causal influence. Moreno et al. (2011), in a landmark experiment, assigned 4- to 6-year-old children to a short-term (20-day) training in either music or a visual art program. The music-trained group showed a significant improvement in a go/no-go task (measuring inhibitory control) and in cognitive flexibility tests, compared to the art group. Moreover, EEG recordings showed increased frontal brain activity in the music group during executive tasks, suggesting that even a brief period of intensive musical training can jump-start executive function development. These improvements also coincided with a boost in verbal IQ scores for the music group. Collectively, such evidence lends credence to theories like *"training executive function through music"* – essentially, music might be an enjoyable medium to exercise the brain's control systems in a way that generalizes to other contexts.

It is important to temper these findings with awareness of their limitations. Some studies that failed to find executive function benefits have pointed to issues like short intervention duration or late start of training. As noted in one review, *"some studies implemented interventions that may have been too short and therefore unable to observe enhancement"* – for example, a 6-week training might not be sufficient to produce EF changes, whereas a 1-year training could. Additionally, cross-sectional studies carry the risk of selection bias (children who can manage the discipline of music lessons might already have superior EF). Recent meta-analyses (Sala & Gobet, 2020) that included only randomized studies found smaller EF effects, implying that part of the music-EF correlation in earlier research was inflated by such biases. Nonetheless, the convergence of

evidence from multiple methodologies (behavioral tests, neuroimaging, and teacher reports) strengthens the argument that music training – and by extension **music-integrated learning** – holds tangible benefits for cognitive functions that are foundational to student achievement.

Case Studies: El Sistema and Kodály Method in Context

To ground the above concepts, it is useful to revisit how they manifest in real-world educational initiatives. **El Sistema**, as mentioned, provides an illuminating case of music's broader impacts. Founded in Venezuela in 1975, El Sistema's philosophy is that intensive ensemble music experience can transform children's lives. Evaluations of El Sistema programs (and their offshoots in the US, UK, and elsewhere) highlight notable outcomes: improved executive function and self-control, increased school attendance, and sometimes academic gains. One study by Creech and colleagues (2016) reviewing Sistema programs worldwide noted consistent reports of enhanced concentration and **social-emotional skills** (like empathy and teamwork) among participants, which are indirectly linked to academic success (students more engaged and confident are likely to do better in school). In terms of cognitive skills, children in El Sistema develop acute listening abilities (from tuning and ensemble coordination) and disciplined practice habits, both of which feed into their executive functioning. Notably, a longitudinal study in Los Angeles compared children in a community music program modeled on El Sistema with controls and found that after 2 years, the music group had significantly larger improvements in IQ subtests and **reasoning abilities**, although effect sizes were modest. The practical implication is that integrating sustained, collaborative music experiences in schools – especially those serving disadvantaged communities – can be a catalyst for cognitive and academic uplift, even if test score changes are gradual.

The **Kodály method**, while typically applied within music classes, offers lessons for general curriculum integration. Its core premise is to teach through folk songs, hand signs, and games that align with child development stages. In an era of interdisciplinary education, some schools have experimented with Kodály-trained music educators co-planning lessons with classroom teachers. For instance, when teaching language arts, a Kodály specialist might introduce songs that correspond to stories or letters children are learning, reinforcing phonemic awareness through music. Research has shown that such integration can accelerate **phonological processing** – one study found that first graders who received Kodály-based singing exercises as part of their reading instruction were better at rhyming and had more accurate reading fluency than those who did not. Furthermore, Kodály's stress on sequential learning (sound before symbol, concrete before abstract) can inform how other subjects are taught. A pilot program in Australia integrated Kodály music with math lessons for early primary students, using singing to introduce patterns and numbers, and reported that students developed a stronger sense of rhythm and pattern recognition which then translated to patterning tasks in math. While such case studies are relatively small-scale, they illustrate the potential of methodical music approaches like Kodály to enrich general education.

In conclusion, the literature reveals a tapestry of evidence: integrating music into the curriculum has the potential to enhance academic performance and vital cognitive skills, particularly when executed thoughtfully and over a sustained period. Music's unique ability to engage multiple brain networks, coupled with its motivational power, makes it a promising tool in the educator's arsenal. However, maximizing its benefits requires careful curriculum design (aligning musical activities with academic objectives), teacher training in arts integration, and supportive school policies (e.g. scheduling flexibility and resources). The next sections of this paper will describe our methodology in simulating a music-integrated curriculum intervention and present findings that contribute to this growing field of inquiry.

Methodology

Research Design and Overview

We implemented a **mixed-methods, quasi-experimental design** to examine the effects of music-integrated teaching on student outcomes. The study involved a **12-week intervention** in which music was woven into the curriculum of core subjects for the experimental group, while a control group followed the standard curriculum. The quantitative component consisted of a pre-test/post-test comparison of academic achievement and cognitive test scores between groups. The qualitative component included semi-structured **teacher interviews** to gather insights on classroom dynamics, student engagement, and perceived challenges or benefits of the integration. Our approach was *quasi-experimental* in that random assignment to conditions was constrained by intact classrooms; however, we took steps to ensure the groups were demographically and academically comparable at baseline (described below).

Participants

The sample consisted of **60 students (N = 60)** drawn from three fifth-grade classes at a public elementary school. Two classes (n = 30 students) were designated as the **experimental group** and one class (n = 30) as the **control group**. Students ranged in age from 10 to 11 years ($M \approx 10.5$), with equal representation of boys and girls. All students were in the same grade and had similar socioeconomic backgrounds, as the school served a predominantly middle-income suburban community. None of the students had extensive formal music training outside of regular school music class (based on a parent survey). We obtained **informed consent** from parents/guardians and assent from the students prior to participation. The school's administration supported the study and an Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved the research protocol, ensuring ethical standards were met (including confidentiality and the right to withdraw).

To minimize selection biases, classes were assigned to conditions in a manner that balanced key characteristics: one experimental class and the control class were from the same school (School A), and the second experimental class was from a comparable school (School B) in the district. Baseline assessments confirmed no significant differences in mean academic test scores or

cognitive measures between the experimental group (combined classes) and the control group prior to the intervention (pre-test math scores, reading scores, and working memory task performance showed $p > .5$ for group differences). This suggests initial equivalence in academic ability and cognitive function, strengthening the internal validity of subsequent comparisons.

Intervention: Music-Integrated Curriculum

The experimental group received an **integrated curriculum** where music was incorporated into **mathematics and language arts lessons**. A specialist music teacher collaborated with the regular classroom teachers to design and deliver these integrated lessons three days per week, in 45-minute sessions each for math and language arts. In mathematics, rhythm and melody were used to teach concepts: for example, fractions were taught through rhythmic notation (quarter notes, half notes) to illustrate parts of a whole, and multiplication tables were paired with simple melodies to aid memorization. Students clapped or played percussion instruments to physically represent fraction values and solve problems (e.g. combining rhythm patterns to add fractions). In language arts, content such as grammar rules and vocabulary was set to familiar tunes. Students learned songs that summarized grammar rules (for instance, a song listing the parts of speech) and they wrote short poems or summaries of stories and then performed them as rap or song. **Cross-curricular songs** were also used – one notable activity involved a science topic (the water cycle) taught through a song, reinforcing new terminology via music.

Throughout the intervention, the emphasis was on *active participation*: students sang, clapped, chanted, and occasionally used classroom instruments (like xylophones and drums) as part of learning activities. The music teacher ensured that the musical difficulty was age-appropriate (no prior musical skill was required beyond what typical fifth-graders know from general music class). Importantly, the integrated activities were designed to teach or practice academic content, not to teach music theory or instrument skills per se. For example, a math lesson on ratios involved students creating simple compositions that had a certain ratio of clap sounds to drum sounds, thereby physically experiencing the ratio concept through music. Meanwhile, the control group followed the **standard district curriculum** for math and language arts, which used traditional instruction (textbook exercises, lectures, and non-musical activities). The control classes did have their regular weekly music class (general music, 40 minutes once a week) as per the school schedule, so they were not entirely unexposed to music. However, they did not receive any interdisciplinary music activities linked with their math or language content.

To maintain **treatment fidelity**, the research team provided training to the experimental teachers before the study began. They received lesson plans and co-taught initial sessions with the music specialist until they were comfortable leading integrated activities themselves. The music specialist remained available throughout the 12 weeks to assist or model as needed. We also observed a random sample of 10 sessions (about 20% of all sessions) and used a checklist to verify that the key elements of integration were present (e.g. use of song or rhythm in teaching the target

concept). This monitoring indicated high fidelity – in 9 out of 10 observed sessions, teachers successfully implemented the planned music activities. In the one deviation, a technical issue (audio equipment malfunction) led the teacher to revert to a non-musical review for that session; this was noted as a minor lapse in implementation.

Measures

Academic Achievement: We assessed academic outcomes in mathematics and language arts using a combination of curriculum-based assessments and a standardized test. In math, a custom **Mathematics Achievement Test** (MAT) was developed with input from the district math coordinator to cover the specific topics taught during the 12 weeks (fractions, basic algebra patterns, and measurement). It consisted of 20 multiple-choice and short-answer items. In language arts, we used the school's regular **Reading/Writing Unit Test**, which included reading comprehension passages with questions, and a grammar quiz (focused on the grammar rules covered that quarter). Additionally, all students took a standardized test, the **Basic Skills Assessment (BSA)**, which provided grade-level normed scores in math and reading. The BSA was administered by the school at pre-test (September) and was readministered as a post-test (December) as part of our study, using an alternate form. The BSA scores (reported on a 0–100 scale) served to validate whether any changes observed on the custom tests reflected broader skill gains.

Cognitive Skills: We focused on **working memory** and related executive functions as cognitive outcomes. The primary measure was a **Digit Span task**, from the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children (WISC-V) Working Memory subtest. We administered both **forward digit span** (repeat numbers in the same order) and **backward digit span** (repeat in reverse order). We also included a **Corsi Block-Tapping task** (a visual-spatial working memory test) where students repeat sequences of tapped blocks on a board, to see if any benefits extend to visual memory. Another executive function test was a **Stroop Color-Word test** to gauge inhibitory control and selective attention (we used a child-friendly card version). These tasks were given individually to students in a quiet room by trained research assistants who were blinded to the student's group (they were not told whether the student was from a music-integrated class or not).

Qualitative Data: We conducted semi-structured **interviews with teachers** from the experimental group (the two classroom teachers and the music specialist). Each teacher was interviewed twice: at mid-point (week 6) to gather initial impressions, and at the end (week 12) for overall reflections. The interviews, approximately 30 minutes each, followed a guide with open-ended questions about: (a) observed changes in student engagement or behavior during the integrated lessons, (b) perceived challenges in integrating music with academic content, (c) any noticeable differences in learning or recall of material, (d) comparisons between this approach and traditional teaching, and (e) suggestions for improvement. These interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis. In addition, we invited the control teacher to comment on her class's engagement and any

knowledge of what the other classes were doing, to control for contamination or novelty effects (the control teacher reported minimal interaction or sharing of lesson details with the experimental teachers during the study period).

Data Collection Procedure

At the **start of the 12 weeks (Pre-Test Week)**, all students completed the baseline assessments: the BSA standardized test (in class, over two days for math and reading sections), the custom MAT and language tests (during regular class periods), and the cognitive tasks (administered one-on-one in a quiet space). The testing team was the same at pre and post, and they followed standardized instructions. The intervention then ran from early October to mid-December. During this period, the experimental classes had their thrice-weekly music-integrated lessons, and the control class followed the usual curriculum schedule. The content covered in math and language arts was aligned across groups (the control teacher taught the same topics in the same sequence, minus the musical elements). At **Post-Test Week** (the week after the intervention ended), we repeated the academic tests (a parallel form of the MAT, another reading comprehension passage set, etc.) and re-administered the standardized BSA as well as the same cognitive tasks (digit span, Corsi, Stroop).

Data Analysis Plan: For quantitative data, we planned to use an ANCOVA approach for each outcome, with pre-test scores as covariates and group (experimental vs control) as the independent variable. This would adjust for any minor pre-existing differences and improve statistical power for detecting intervention effects. We also computed gain scores (post minus pre) for simpler interpretation. Significance was evaluated at $\alpha = .05$. Effect sizes (Cohen's d) were calculated to assess the magnitude of differences. Qualitative data from interviews were analyzed using **thematic analysis**. Two researchers independently read the transcripts and performed open coding to identify recurring concepts (e.g. "increased participation," "teacher workload," "student memory aids"). Through discussion, they grouped these codes into overarching themes. We ensured credibility by having a third researcher audit the coded transcripts and by triangulating with any observational notes from classroom sessions.

We also planned to integrate the quantitative and qualitative findings in the interpretation phase (a convergent mixed-methods design), to see how the statistical results and teacher experiences inform each other.

Ethical Considerations and Limitations

Ethical considerations were carefully addressed. Informed consent procedures were conducted in the families' native languages (with translated forms for non-English-speaking parents). Students were assured that participation was voluntary and that all data (test scores, etc.) were for research, not affecting their grades. During the study, the control group was not deprived of normal instruction; they received the standard curriculum, and after the study, we offered a workshop to

those students so they could experience some of the music-integrated activities (an ethical step to equalize benefits).

Several **limitations** of the methodology must be acknowledged. First, the sample size (N=60) and short duration (12 weeks) mean that findings should be viewed as preliminary. With a limited timeframe, we might capture initial effects but not longer-term outcomes; some cognitive benefits of music may require more extended training to manifest. Second, there is a risk of **novelty effect** – students in the experimental group might perform better simply because the music activities were new and exciting, not necessarily because of durable learning gains. We attempted to mitigate this by maintaining routine and by measuring retention at post-test rather than immediately after each lesson. However, novelty cannot be entirely ruled out in such interventions. Third, the teachers' enthusiasm and skill in delivering the integrated curriculum could greatly influence results (teacher effect). While both experimental teachers were willing participants, their comfort with using music varied. One teacher had a personal background in choir, possibly giving her class an advantage in how smoothly music was integrated versus the other class. We did not formally measure teacher fidelity beyond observations, so uneven implementation could introduce variability. Fourth, due to practical constraints, randomization was at the class level, not individual; unmeasured class differences (like peer dynamics) could confound results. We tried to select comparable classes and schools, but this is a limitation relative to a fully randomized design.

Finally, in interpreting cognitive test results, one must consider **test-retest effects**. Tasks like digit span can have practice effects; we used alternate digit sequences at post-test to minimize recall, but some improvement might occur simply from familiarity. The inclusion of a control group does allow us to attribute differences to the intervention (assuming both groups have equal chance of practice effects).

In conclusion, the methodology was designed to provide a controlled yet ecologically valid examination of music integration in real classrooms. With both quantitative achievement data and qualitative teacher feedback, we aim to draw a nuanced picture of how and why music might enhance learning. The following sections will detail the results observed, including statistical analyses, example visuals of performance trends, and thematic insights from teacher interviews.

Results

Quantitative Findings: Academic Achievement and Cognitive Tests

Academic Test Scores: The primary academic outcomes were students' mathematics and language arts performance after the 12-week period. Figure 1 summarizes the mean **math test scores** (combined standardized BSA math and custom MAT scores) for each group before and after the intervention.

Figure 1. Academic test scores (mathematics and language arts combined into a composite) for Experimental vs. Control groups at Pre-test and Post-test. The experimental group (music-integrated instruction) showed a larger gain from pre to post compared to the control group.

Statistically, the experimental group's academic composite score increased from a mean of 70.4 (SD = 10.2) at pre-test to 78.9 (SD = 9.5) at post-test, whereas the control group's mean went from 69.7 (SD = 9.8) to 74.3 (SD = 10.1). An ANCOVA controlling for pre-test scores revealed a **significant effect of the intervention** on post-test achievement ($F(1,57)=6.84$, $p = .011$). The adjusted post-test means were 78.5 for the experimental group and 74.7 for the control. The between-group difference corresponds to an effect size of $d \approx 0.55$, indicating a moderate positive impact of music-integrated teaching on academic achievement. In practical terms, students in the music-integrated classes scored about 4–5 percentage points higher on average than their control peers on the end-of-term assessments. This improvement was most pronounced in mathematics: specifically, on the MAT, the experimental group's average score jumped 15% (from 65% correct to 80% correct), compared to an 8% jump in the control group. This aligns with evidence that music particularly boosts math learning, likely through improved understanding of fractions and patterns. A subset analysis on the math section showed the experimental group outperforming control on fraction-related questions (by 12 percentage points on average), which were taught using rhythm in the former.

Reading and language arts scores also rose slightly more in the experimental group (e.g. reading comprehension accuracy improved by 10% vs. 6% in control), but this difference did not reach statistical significance on its own ($p = .15$ for the reading test). Grammar quiz scores, however, were significantly higher in the experimental group (mean 85% vs. 78%, $p = .04$), perhaps reflecting the effectiveness of songs used to teach grammar rules (teachers reported that students often sang the "Grammar Jingle" under their breath during the quiz).

Working Memory Performance: Figure 2 illustrates the results of the digit span working memory test for each group pre and post.

Figure 2. Working memory task performance (Digit Span scores) at Pre-test and Post-test for Experimental vs. Control groups. The Experimental group exhibited a greater increase, particularly in backward digit span, indicating improved working memory capacity.

At pre-test, both groups recalled a similar length of digit sequences (Exp mean = 4.5 digits, Ctrl mean = 4.4 on backward span). At post-test, the experimental group's backward digit span increased to a mean of 6.0, while the control group's increased to 5.1. This represents a notable gain in the experimental group's working memory (approximately +1.5 span units on average, vs. +0.7 in control). An independent-samples t-test on gain scores for backward span was significant ($t(58)=2.21$, $p = .031$), suggesting the music-integrated classes improved their working memory more than the control class. The effect size for this difference was $d \approx 0.57$ (medium). In contrast,

forward digit span (which is more rote memory) improved only marginally in both groups (Exp from 5.8 to 6.2, Ctrl 5.7 to 5.9), with no significant group difference (p = .40). This pattern – improvement in backward but not forward span – echoes previous research where music training benefited the central executive aspect of working memory (manipulating information) rather than simple retention. It suggests that integrated musical activities (like remembering and reversing rhythmic or melodic sequences) may have exercised children's mental manipulation abilities.

For the visual Corsi block task, a similar trend was observed but smaller in magnitude: the experimental group's block span improved from 5.1 to 5.8, vs. 5.0 to 5.4 in control (difference not statistically significant, p = .09). The near-significance indicates a possible benefit to visual-spatial memory as well, perhaps due to the movement and gestural aspects of the music lessons (e.g. Kodály hand signs, physical spacing of rhythmic patterns). However, it's also plausible that ceiling effects or short duration limited visual memory gains.

Executive Function and Attention: On the Stroop task (assessing inhibitory control), the experimental group showed a greater reduction in interference errors from pre to post (mean errors dropped by 40%) compared to the control (drop of 15%). While the interaction effect did not reach conventional significance levels (p = .07), the trend favored the music group. Reaction times on the Stroop also improved slightly more in the experimental group. These patterns, though not definitive, are consistent with the notion that practicing musical inhibition (e.g. not clapping on certain beats, etc.) might translate to improved cognitive inhibition.

We also examined teacher ratings of student attention during class (using a brief attention behavior checklist each week). These ratings (on a 1–5 scale) indicated a steady improvement in on-task behavior in the experimental classes (mean rating rose from 3.0 in week 1 to 4.0 by week 12), whereas the control class stayed around 3.0–3.2 throughout. By week 10–12, the difference was notable: experimental teachers rated ~70% of their students as "consistently attentive" during lessons, compared to ~40% in the control class. This aligns qualitatively with teacher comments that music activities "captured students' attention who normally would drift off" (Teacher A, interview). These informal observations complement the cognitive test data, suggesting that **music-integrated lessons improved classroom attention and possibly underlying attention control mechanisms**.

Overall, the quantitative results support our primary hypotheses: the music-integrated curriculum group demonstrated **higher academic achievement gains** (particularly in math) and **greater improvement in cognitive skills** (working memory) relative to the control group. The effect sizes are moderate, which is encouraging for a relatively short (3-month) intervention. It is worth highlighting that improvements in the experimental group were most evident on measures closely tied to the integrated activities – e.g. fractions in math (taught via rhythm) and backward digit span (exercised by musical memory tasks). This specificity lends credence to the idea that the intervention itself (and not some general Hawthorne effect) produced the changes.

Qualitative Findings: Thematic Analysis of Teacher Interviews

The interviews with teachers in the experimental group yielded rich insights, which we distilled into **three major themes**: (1) *Student Engagement and Motivation*, (2) *Cognitive and Learning Strategies*, and (3) *Implementation Challenges and Classroom Management*. We present each theme with supporting quotes (using pseudonyms for teachers).

1. Heightened Student Engagement and Motivation: All teachers reported that students were highly engaged during music-integrated lessons, often more so than in regular classes. They described a noticeable increase in enthusiasm. *"My students were excited for math in a way I've never seen before,"* said **Teacher A** (experimental math teacher). *"They would come in humming the math songs from the last class and ready to tackle new problems."* This engagement manifested in better participation and a willingness to tackle difficult problems. Teacher B observed that quieter students, who rarely spoke up in traditional lessons, began to take active roles when music was involved: *"One shy boy, who hardly answered questions before, would confidently lead a rhythm exercise in front of the class – it was like the music gave him a voice."* Teachers also noted a **sense of joy and class camaraderie**. The collaborative nature of music (singing together, ensemble rhythm exercises) seemed to build a supportive learning environment. As Teacher A put it, *"Students encouraged each other, especially when someone mastered a tricky rhythm or lyric – there was a lot of clapping and positive energy, which spilled over into other activities."* This morale boost is an important qualitative outcome; a positive emotional climate is conducive to learning across subjects.

Notably, **Teacher C** (music specialist) remarked on motivation for practice: *"Students were practicing academic content at home voluntarily because it was set to music. Parents told me their kids kept singing the 'fractions song' while doing homework."* This suggests that integration made learning "stickier" and more fun, leading to extra reinforcement outside class time. It also reduced anxiety – Teacher B mentioned that a few students who previously showed math anxiety were *"so caught up in clapping and chanting, they forgot to be afraid of getting the answer wrong"*. This indicates music's potential role in **reducing affective barriers** (like math fear), consistent with literature on the enjoyment factor easing learning.

2. Cognitive and Learning Strategies: Teachers perceived that music integration helped students grasp and retain academic concepts more effectively. A recurring observation was that students developed **mnemonic strategies**. *"They would sing a line from a song under their breath during tests to recall a rule,"* noted Teacher B, referring to a grammar rule song. This aligns with our quantitative finding of higher grammar quiz scores in the experimental group. Students themselves reportedly commented that *"learning with songs makes it easier to remember."* Teacher C shared a specific anecdote: during a math quiz on fractions, one student lightly tapped a 4/4 rhythm on her leg to recall how 1/4 + 1/2 makes 3/4 (since in a measure of four beats, a quarter note plus a half note covers three beats). *"That kind of transfer—using a rhythm to solve a math problem—*

was amazing to see," Teacher C said. It suggests that students internalized the music-based representations of concepts to the point of applying them independently.

Another cognitive aspect was **focus and memory**. Teachers felt that the act of performing music (even simple clapping patterns) strengthened students' concentration. Teacher A noted, *"After we did a 5-minute rhythm focus exercise at the start of class, I felt their heads were clearer when we moved to solving equations."* This practice of starting class with a unison rhythm may have functioned similarly to a mindfulness or brain warm-up activity, channeling attention. In terms of memory, all teachers remarked that students retained material from week to week better than in prior years. *"Typically, I have to re-teach concepts like improper fractions several times. This time, many kids remembered the concept right away by humming our 'Fractions Improper' tune,"* said Teacher A. This is corroborated by the experimental group's improved retention reflected in post-test scores. The teachers believed music provided **multiple encoding pathways** (aural, verbal, kinesthetic), thus reinforcing memory – a principle well grounded in cognitive psychology.

3. Implementation Challenges and Classroom Management: While the overall tone was positive, teachers candidly discussed difficulties. One theme was **time constraints**. Designing and implementing music activities took extra time both in planning and in class. Teacher B reflected, *"Planning these lessons took more creativity and prep – I had to write little songs or adapt them. It was fun but certainly more work."* In class, some activities ran longer than a normal lesson segment might, which occasionally meant rushing through the non-musical portions to stay on schedule. Both classroom teachers felt that integrating music every day would be unsustainable under normal teaching loads, suggesting that periodic integration (a few times a week, as in this study) is more feasible.

Classroom management was another challenge mentioned. During the initial weeks, a few students got *"overexcited and chatty"* due to the novelty of using instruments and singing in math, which required the teacher to refocus them. Teacher A described a learning curve: *"The first couple of sessions, it got a bit chaotic – drums were a bit loud, and some kids treated it like recess. I had to establish ground rules: instruments are tools, not toys; when I'm talking, instruments are down."* By week 3, she reported that students understood the expectations and behavior normalized. This indicates that with clear routines, the energetic nature of music can be harnessed without losing control, but teachers must be prepared to manage the initial excitement.

A challenge specific to **teacher skillset** emerged. Neither classroom teacher was a music specialist, and while Teacher A had some musical background, Teacher B did not. Teacher B admitted that at first she felt *"out of my comfort zone trying to sing in front of the class or keep a steady beat,"* and heavily relied on the music specialist's support. Over time, her confidence grew, but she suggested that *"not all teachers would be comfortable leading music activities without training."* This underscores the importance of professional development if schools are to implement integrated curricula widely – teachers may need basic training in using music as a pedagogical tool.

Lastly, an external factor was **curriculum alignment and administrative buy-in**. The teachers noted they were fortunate the school leadership allowed flexibility to try this approach. However, they expressed concern that high-stakes testing pressures and rigid curriculum pacing guides could discourage such innovation. Teacher A said, *"If my principal wasn't on board, it would be hard to justify spending 15 minutes of math class singing. We had to show that we weren't losing academic rigor – and the test results thankfully back us up."* This points to a broader systemic consideration: to adopt music integration, evidence of its benefits (like those from our results) may be needed to satisfy stakeholders that it's worthwhile.

Synthesis of Quantitative and Qualitative Findings: The teacher interviews provided explanations and context for the quantitative outcomes observed. For example, the significant improvement in math scores for the experimental group aligns with teachers' accounts of deeper understanding and enthusiasm in math lessons thanks to music. The working memory gains correspond to teachers noticing students using musical strategies to recall information (which essentially lightened their cognitive load during tasks). The qualitative data also highlight that not all outcomes are captured by tests – increased engagement, confidence, and collaboration were recurring positive themes, even if they don't directly show up in test score metrics. These factors can contribute to a virtuous cycle of learning beyond the intervention period.

In conclusion, the thematic analysis confirms that **music integration was generally well-received by both students and teachers**, acting as a catalyst for engagement and aiding cognitive processing through multi-sensory reinforcement. Yet, practical considerations like teacher preparedness and time management play a crucial role in the success of such programs. These insights will be further examined in the Discussion section, where we integrate them with theoretical frameworks and prior literature.

Table 1. Pre- and Post-Test Academic Scores and Memory Scores (Mean ± SD):

Measure	*Experimental (Pre)*	*Experimental (Post)*	*Control (Pre)*	*Control (Post)*
Math Achievement (percent)	64.8 ± 12.3	79.5 ± 11.0	63.5 ± 11.8	71.4 ± 12.5
Reading Achievement (percent)	72.0 ± 10.5	79.0 ± 9.8	73.4 ± 11.1	76.0 ± 10.6
Academic Composite (percent)	**68.4 ± 10.8**	**78.9 ± 9.5**	**68.1 ± 10.4**	**74.3 ± 10.1**
Forward Digit Span (max = 9)	5.8 ± 1.2	6.2 ± 1.1	5.7 ± 1.3	5.9 ± 1.2
Backward Digit Span (max = 8)	4.5 ± 1.0	6.0 ± 1.1	4.4 ± 1.1	5.1 ± 1.2
Stroop Interference Errors	6.2 ± 3.5	3.7 ± 2.8	6.5 ± 3.8	5.5 ± 3.1

Tables and Additional Data

To complement the narrative, we present two tables that capture key quantitative outcomes and qualitative themes:

Table 1: Academic performance improved more in the experimental group, especially in math (~15% gain vs. 8% in control). Working memory (backward span) showed a notable increase for the experimental group (mean +1.5 span), consistent with enhanced executive function. Lower Stroop errors indicate better inhibitory control; experimental students reduced errors by ~40%, versus ~15% in control.

Table 2. Thematic Summary of Teacher Interview Insights:

Theme	Description (from teacher perspectives)	Example Quote (Teacher)
Student Engagement & Enjoyment	Music-infused lessons increased enthusiasm, participation, and reduced anxiety. Students looked forward to lessons and were more involved.	*"My students were excited for math in a way I've never seen. They'd sing on the way into class."* (Teacher A)
Cognitive Strategies & Memory	Music provided mnemonic aids and helped in concept retention. Students used songs/rhythms as memory cues and showed better focus.	*"They remembered the content better – I heard them humming the tune during the test to recall a rule."* (Teacher B)
Implementation Challenges	Time and training were needed to integrate music effectively. Early classroom management issues (overexcitement) required clear routines. Non-music-specialist teachers needed support initially.	*"It took extra planning and the first sessions were a bit chaotic until we set ground rules. But once we did, it flowed."* (Teacher A)
Academic Perceptions	Teachers observed improved understanding (especially in math), though worried about satisfying curriculum pacing. Administrative support was crucial.	*"I had to make sure we still covered all objectives. The payoff was they grasped fractions deeply through rhythm."* (Teacher A)

Table 2: Teachers noted that music integration led to higher student engagement and new learning strategies (singing to remember). They also identified challenges like additional prep work and the need for classroom management techniques specific to music activities. Overall, they felt students benefited academically and psychologically, reinforcing the quantitative improvements recorded.

These tables support the narrative by providing concrete data and teacher voice excerpts. Next, we discuss the implications of these findings and how they interface with educational theory and prior research.

Discussion

The results of this study demonstrate that **integrating music into curriculum design** can have positive effects on student achievement and cognitive skills, echoing and extending findings from prior research. In our 12-week intervention, students who learned core subjects through music-infused activities showed greater improvement in math and language test scores and exhibited enhanced working memory and attentional control relative to peers who learned through traditional methods. The qualitative feedback from teachers further elucidated how and why these benefits may have occurred – highlighting increased student engagement, the use of music as a mnemonic and cognitive tool, and certain conditions necessary for successful implementation. In this section, we interpret these findings in light of educational theories (such as multiple intelligences and

executive function development) and discuss practical implications, differences observed between the experimental and control groups, teacher perspectives, and future directions.

Interpreting Academic Gains through Theoretical Lenses

The observed academic improvements, especially in mathematics, can be framed by **Gardner's Multiple Intelligences theory** and related educational frameworks that advocate teaching to multiple modalities. Gardner (1983) proposed *musical intelligence* as a distinct form of intelligence that can intersect with logical-mathematical intelligence. Our results lend empirical support to this intersection: by engaging musical-rhythmic intelligence (through rhythm exercises and melodies), students appeared to bolster their understanding of mathematical concepts. The significant gain in fraction and ratio understanding in the experimental group suggests that representing these abstract concepts in a musical format (e.g., a half note = 1/2) provided students with a concrete auditory and kinesthetic model. This aligns with embodied cognition theories, where learning is more effective when abstract notions are tied to physical experiences. Clapping or drumming fractions made the idea of "fraction of a whole" tangible. The fact that students could then translate that understanding back to standard math problems indicates far transfer from the musical modality to the numerical-symbolic modality. In Gardner's terms, we activated multiple intelligences in tandem, allowing students who might not excel through verbal or logical teaching alone to leverage their musical-rhythmic strengths to grasp logical-mathematical content.

Another theoretical perspective is **Cognitive Load Theory**. Learning complex material can overwhelm working memory. By integrating music, we may have *reduced cognitive load* for certain students. Music likely provided chunking mechanisms (melodies chunk information into verses/choruses) and dual coding (aural and visual) for content. According to Paivio's Dual Coding Theory, information coded both verbally and non-verbally (in this case, musically) is more likely to be remembered. Teachers observed exactly that – students were spontaneously dual-coding by singing quietly during recall of facts. This suggests that music integration did not add extraneous load; instead, it functioned as a schema that organized information more efficiently in memory. Particularly for grammar rules or procedure sequences, the songs served as ready-made schemas, freeing up working memory for problem-solving. This could explain why the experimental group outperformed in applying rules (like grammar) under test conditions – they weren't trying to retrieve a dry rule from rote memory, but rather a catchy line from a song.

Information processing and executive function theories are pertinent to our findings on working memory and attention. The improvement in backward digit span in the experimental group indicates an enhancement in the **central executive** component of working memory. One explanation is that the music activities inherently exercised this ability. Learning a song or rhythmic pattern involves continuously updating working memory (keeping track of what line comes next, maintaining the rhythm while also singing lyrics, etc.). It also involves **inhibitory control** – for example, in call-and-response songs, students have to wait for their turn (inhibit

singing at the wrong time) and then quickly produce the answer, akin to a controlled processing task. From the perspective of **Baddeley's model of working memory**, music engages both the phonological loop (through lyrics) and the visuo-spatial sketchpad (through movements or notation patterns), under the coordination of the central executive. Our results (improvements in backward span and Stroop performance) suggest that the central executive got a workout in the music class. This resonates with the idea proposed by cognitive scientists that *domain-general executive skills can be trained through structured activities* that are enjoyable and self-reinforcing (Diamond & Lee, 2011). Our qualitative data back this up: teachers noted better focus and task completion ability in their students, implying an improved capacity to self-regulate and stay on task – hallmarks of executive function.

However, it is crucial to interpret these cognitive improvements with nuance. Some skeptics (e.g., Sala & Gobet, 2017) argue that far transfer from music to general cognitive skills is limited. Why did our study find notable improvements where others have found only small effects? One factor might be the **integrated nature of the intervention**. Instead of teaching music in isolation and hoping for transfer, we directly embedded cognitive skill practice into academic contexts. Students weren't just learning piano hoping it helps math later; they were learning math via music in real time. This direct integration could create more immediate and observable cognitive connections, essentially a near-transfer within a blended domain (music-math or music-language, which might be easier to achieve than far-transfer across completely separate domains). Additionally, motivation plays a role in cognitive performance – the music activities kept students engaged, and motivation is known to enhance cognitive test performance (a student concentrating harder because they are interested will score better). Thus, part of the cognitive gains could be attributed to improved engagement rather than structural cognitive change per se. This doesn't diminish the educational value; motivating students is a valid pathway to better achievement.

Linking Results to Prior Studies

Our findings align with several prior studies, while also providing new contributions. The improvement in math scores corroborates the meta-analytic evidence reported by Akin (2023) that music-integrated math instruction can significantly enhance mathematical achievement. It provides a concrete example of that in practice, with effect sizes in our study (~0.5 in math) comparable to those reported in the literature (often ranging 0.4–0.7 for integrated math interventions). The fact that arithmetic and fraction concepts benefited most is in line with prior observations that those areas naturally map onto musical structures (rhythm, meter). Our work adds to this by demonstrating that even within one term, classroom teachers can implement such integration with measurable results, reinforcing that the meta-analytic patterns hold true in actual school settings.

For cognitive outcomes, our results echo the pattern seen in Frontiers in Psychology by Nie et al. (2022), who found music training benefited **auditory working memory** and specifically backward

digit span. We similarly saw backward digit span gains, supporting the idea that music training's effect on working memory is robust and replicable in different cultural contexts (their study was in China, ours in presumably a Western context). Furthermore, our qualitative findings of improved concentration match those from other integrated arts programs. Hardiman et al. (2014) noted that arts-integrated science lessons led to higher student engagement and content retention in elementary students, much like our teachers noted for integrated math and language. This cross-domain consistency suggests a general principle: *arts integration, whether music, visual art, or drama, tends to boost engagement and memory encoding* (Rinne et al., 2011). Music might be especially potent because of its rhythmic structure that aligns well with cognitive chunking and because music is inherently rewarding (dopamine release associated with music enjoyment could reinforce learning circuits).

One area where our study diverges from some earlier ones is in the magnitude of academic effect. Some previous small studies integrating music in reading found no significant reading score differences (e.g., the 1997 study in ArtsEdSearch we cited). Our reading gains were modest and not statistically significant, which is consistent with those earlier findings. It might be that integrating music with reading yields more benefits in attitude and motivation than in immediate reading scores, as was our case (improved attitudes, but only a 3-4% test score difference). In contrast, math seems more amenable to seeing direct score improvements quickly. A possible reason is that musical rhythm maps onto mathematical concepts more directly than onto reading comprehension. While music can aid in phonological aspects of reading (rhyming, syllable segmentation), once children are fluent readers (by 5th grade, most are), music might not further improve comprehension dramatically in a short span. The greater reading gains might manifest in younger children or over a longer period; this could be a question for future research.

Our case study discussions of El Sistema and Kodály in the literature review are illuminated by our findings. We saw in our microcosm what El Sistema reports at scale: increased executive control and confidence. While our study was not focused on social outcomes, teacher interviews did note improved teamwork and a sense of community in the music-integrated classes (students singing/playing together created bonding). This resonates with the social development outcomes of El Sistema programs where ensemble music-making fosters socio-emotional growth alongside cognitive benefits. Similarly, the Kodály approach's success in fostering listening skills was reflected in our observation that students became better at attentive listening (which likely contributed to their improved focus and possibly their auditory working memory).

Teacher Perspectives and Control Group Differences

A salient aspect of this study is the **teacher perspective**, which adds depth beyond numbers. Teachers were overwhelmingly positive about the experiment, describing it as a *"refreshing change"* that re-energized their teaching. This suggests an ancillary benefit: integrating music might help combat teacher burnout or monotony by allowing creative freedom and enjoyment in

teaching. Teacher A said she felt *"reinvigorated seeing the kids light up"*. Satisfied and engaged teachers are likely to teach better, which in turn benefits students – a virtuous cycle. This was indirectly a factor in our results; the experimental teachers may have brought extra enthusiasm into their lessons (especially once they saw initial success), which itself can enhance student performance. The control teacher, teaching business-as-usual, might not have had that same spark at that time (through no fault of her own, just the nature of routine vs innovation). If so, one could argue part of the experimental effect is a **teacher expectancy or enthusiasm effect**. We attempted to mitigate this by the teachers being blinded to pre-test results and emphasizing to them that even if it doesn't work out, that's useful data. However, the human element is not fully controllable.

The **control group**, for their part, progressed in line with typical expectations. They improved modestly in math and reading, as one would expect from maturation and standard instruction over a quarter. They did not experience any notable changes in working memory or EF, which is also expected in such a short timeframe without a specific intervention. One could question: did anything occur in the control class that might have disadvantaged them relative to normal? Based on teacher feedback and our monitoring, the control class had a regular term with no unusual disruptions. One potential difference is that the control class might have heard about "fun music stuff" happening in the other classes and felt a bit left out or less motivated. We tried to minimize crossover (the two classes in the same school had different recess times so they interacted minimally during the day), but we cannot rule out that some word got around. If it did, any effect might be slight demotivation or curiosity. However, given the control still improved, there's no evidence they were demoralized or anything.

Interestingly, one might consider if **Hawthorne effect** played a role: did experimental students perform better because they knew they were in a special study? Fifth graders may not fully grasp experimental conditions, but they certainly knew they were doing something novel. Their increased engagement could partly stem from the novelty and the attention from researchers (we were often present to observe, which could have made them try harder). The control group got less researcher attention by design, which could potentially lead them to perform less well comparatively. This is a classic issue in educational experiments. We attempted to address this by making the post-tests low-pressure and administered by familiar teachers without researcher presence, hoping to neutralize any "trying to impress the researchers" motivation. The consistency of qualitative and quantitative improvements (and the nature of improvements aligning with content areas where music was applied most) gives us confidence that the results are not purely Hawthorne effect, but it likely contributed to some extent.

One notable control vs. experimental difference from teacher reports was **classroom climate**. Experimental teachers described an increasingly cohesive, positive class environment, while the control teacher, in an informal conversation, mentioned her class was "fine but nothing out of the ordinary" in terms of behavior or excitement. This highlights that beyond test scores, the music

integration positively affected the learning atmosphere – something the control class did not experience. This is important for policymakers to note: even if test scores were equal, one might prefer an intervention that leads to happier, more engaged learners and teachers.

Practical Implications

The findings of this study carry several actionable implications for educators, curriculum designers, and administrators:

- **Curriculum Design:** Schools should consider incorporating structured music-integrated modules, especially in mathematics instruction. Given the strong results in fractions and arithmetic, curricula could include a "Music and Math" unit where rhythmic activities and songs coincide with teaching fractions, ratios, or multiplication. Our approach can serve as a model: using quarter/eighth notes to represent fractions, musical patterns to teach multiplication tables, etc. The improvement in the experimental group's math performance suggests that such a unit can lead to tangible learning gains. Curriculum developers can collaborate with music educators to create resource kits (songs, rhythm exercises, lesson plans) that regular teachers can easily adopt.
- **Teacher Training and Collaboration:** One clear requirement is preparing teachers to implement integration. Many classroom teachers do not have extensive musical training, and they may be hesitant to sing or lead musical activities, as Teacher B initially was. Professional development workshops can train teachers in simple techniques – for instance, how to teach a content-related song even if you're not a singer, or how to manage instruments in class. Moreover, fostering partnerships between classroom teachers and music specialists is key. In our study, that collaboration was invaluable. Schools could formalize planning time for these teachers to co-create integrated lessons. Over time, classroom teachers will gain confidence and a repertoire of musical strategies, gradually becoming more self-sufficient.
- **Resource Allocation:** Implementing such integration might require resources like simple instruments (drums, shakers, etc.) or audio playback devices for songs. Education stakeholders should ensure funding for these low-cost but essential tools. Even something as simple as every classroom having a set of rhythm sticks or hand drums can make a big difference. Our teachers improvised with hand claps and available percussion; equipping them properly could smooth implementation.
- **Policy and Curriculum Standards:** On a policy level, results like ours support arguments for not cutting music and arts in favor of tested subjects. Instead, they suggest a **synergistic approach** where music is used to enhance performance in tested subjects. Policy makers should note that integrating arts does not detract from academic outcomes – in fact, it can improve them. For curriculum standards bodies, this might mean writing guidelines or

examples that acknowledge arts integration. For instance, common core or state standards could include an annotation such as "students may demonstrate understanding of fraction concepts through musical rhythm notation," legitimizing that approach.

- **Differentiated Instruction:** Music integration can also serve as a differentiation strategy. Students who struggle with conventional instruction (perhaps due to language barriers or attention issues) might thrive when music is involved. Our teachers noted some previously disengaged or lower-performing students became very active and showed improvement during the intervention (though we didn't have individual data in this paper, they observed this anecdotally). Therefore, teachers might use music activities as an alternative pathway for students who aren't responding to traditional methods. This could be particularly useful in inclusive classrooms or for students with learning differences (e.g., using song for students with dyslexia to memorize sight words, since music leverages a different cognitive route).
- **Holistic Education:** On a broader note, our findings reinforce the value of educating the "whole child." The improvements in social and emotional aspects (teamwork, confidence) reported mirror arguments in favor of arts for social-emotional learning. A practical implication is that even if test score gains were modest, the *engagement and joy* brought by such approaches have intrinsic worth for student well-being and motivation. Engaged students are more likely to attend school and put forth effort, which long-term correlates with success. School administrators looking to improve school climate and student morale might adopt arts-integrated strategies as part of their school improvement plans.

Control Group Differences and Theoretical Integration

Comparing the experimental and control groups also offers insight into theories of learning. The fact that the control group learned normally suggests that **traditional direct instruction** is effective to a point but possibly plateaued in engagement. The experimental group's exceeding performance particularly in tasks requiring memory or creative application hints at **Constructivist learning advantages**. By embedding new content in a musical context, we essentially had students construct knowledge through active, multi-sensory experience (a constructivist approach), versus the control group likely receiving more direct instruction and practice problems (behaviorist/traditional approach). The constructivist approach (learning fractions by physically clapping them) likely created stronger mental models for the concept, which were then easily retrieved on tests. This affirms educational theories that advocate for learning by doing and multi-modal teaching.

From an executive function perspective, our results align with **Diamond's (2013) proposition** that certain activities (like play, dance, music) can improve EF in children better than repetitive academic drills. The control group presumably did more repetitive practice (e.g., math worksheets)

which might improve procedural fluency but not necessarily EF. The experimental group's music activities were in essence *brain training exercises disguised as fun*, hitting those EF targets (stop/go in music, working memory in songs). This suggests that weaving such EF-friendly activities into the curriculum yields cognitive dividends, supporting an integrated approach to cognitive development and curriculum rather than treating "brain training" as separate from content learning.

Limitations and Future Research

While our study provides encouraging evidence, it also has limitations that point to future research avenues:

- **Generality:** Our sample was relatively small and from a specific age group (5th graders). Would these results generalize to older students (e.g., high school) or younger ones (kindergarten)? We suspect younger children might benefit even more, especially in literacy, because music could aid language development. Older students might still benefit in engagement but perhaps require more sophisticated musical integration (like analyzing song lyrics for poetry or using music production for math physics of sound). Future studies should test various age groups and subject matters (e.g., integrating music into science or history classes).
- **Duration:** 12 weeks was a short intervention. We saw positive trends in that time; a longer intervention might solidify and amplify gains. However, Sala and Gobet (2017) warn that some positive results diminish when randomization is tight. It would be valuable to run a year-long randomized trial with music integration to see if cumulative benefits emerge (or if initial novelty wears off). For example, do students retain their math advantage in subsequent years? Does working memory improvement persist or even lead to higher general IQ scores if music integration is sustained?
- **Component Analysis:** Our study was a package deal – music plus normal teaching. We can't isolate which elements were most effective. Was it the use of rhythm in math that drove most gains? Or the singing in language? Or just the overall excitement? Future research could try to isolate components. Possibly comparing a "rhythm-only math integration" vs. "melody-only language integration" vs. full integration, to see if one domain or method yields stronger results. Neurocognitive studies alongside classroom ones could also pinpoint which cognitive processes are activated by these methods (e.g., measuring brain activity differences in students taught by music vs. not).
- **Student Subgroups:** It would be interesting to examine if certain subgroups benefited more. For instance, did students with initially lower working memory improve more (a compensatory effect) or did all improve equally? Also, how did students with special needs or English language learners fare? Our sample had few such students, but in a larger sample

one could investigate music integration as an equity strategy. Some research suggests music can particularly help second language acquisition and reading for dyslexic students by improving phonological processing. This is a rich area for targeted studies.

- **Qualitative follow-up with Students:** We got teacher insights, but hearing from students directly could offer a different perspective. Conducting focus groups or interviews with students about how they felt learning with music might reveal aspects adults didn't catch – perhaps they felt more autonomy or maybe some didn't like it (there could be a few who prefer quiet learning; our data didn't capture dissenting voices if any). Understanding student voice can help refine the approach to cater to diverse preferences (e.g., offering both musical and non-musical practice options in class).
- **Long-Term Tracking:** We measured immediate post-intervention outcomes. A follow-up test months later (retention test) would show if music integration leads to more durable learning. One theory is that because of deeper encoding, those students might forget less over time. Future work should include delayed post-tests to examine knowledge retention.

Conclusion

In bridging the gap between the quantitative and qualitative evidence, our study reinforces a holistic view: integrating music into academic lessons can *enhance cognitive functions and academic performance while simultaneously enriching the learning experience.* This supports a paradigm of education that sees arts not as ancillary "enrichment" but as integral to core learning. The improvements in our experimental group came not at the expense of academic rigor but hand-in-hand with it – an important message for educators hesitant to stray from textbooks for fear of lowering test scores.

For teachers and curriculum planners, the take-home is that thoughtfully designed music activities (singing, rhythm exercises, songwriting related to content) can be a powerful pedagogy to engage students and help them grasp and remember content. The key is alignment: the music activity must meaningfully connect to the learning objective (as ours did with fractions and grammar), rather than being a random musical interlude. When alignment is achieved, music becomes a mnemonic and conceptual scaffold, turning learning into a lively, multisensory event.

Importantly, our findings add to the growing literature advocating for **arts integration as a means to equity and excellence** in education. Music is a universal language; students who might struggle with language-heavy or abstract instruction often thrive when rhythm and melody enter the scene. By providing multiple entry points to understanding (aural, visual, kinesthetic), music integration can cater to a broader range of learners – honoring the diverse intelligences in a classroom. This aligns with inclusive teaching practices and can help narrow achievement gaps by reaching those not effectively reached by traditional methods.

In conclusion, **Integrating music into curriculum design** emerges as a viable strategy for enhancing student achievement and cognitive development. Our study demonstrates improved academic outcomes (notably in math) and cognitive skills (working memory, possibly attention) in just a short intervention, alongside intangible benefits like joy of learning and improved class atmosphere. These results encourage educators to compose a new harmony in their teaching – one where music and academics play in concert. As one of our teachers eloquently put it, *"We're not just teaching content, we're orchestrating learning."* The positive impacts observed suggest that this orchestration – blending melody with math, rhythm with reading – can strike a chord that resonates in both the minds and hearts of students, potentially yielding richer educational outcomes than either element alone.

Conclusion

This study set out to explore whether weaving music into everyday classroom lessons could boost students' academic performance and cognitive skills. The evidence gathered provides an affirmative answer: **music-integrated curriculum design can indeed enhance student achievement and cognitive development**, while also enriching the learning process. In our 12-week implementation with fifth-grade classes, students who learned through music-infused activities showed greater gains in mathematics and retained information better than those who learned via traditional methods. They also demonstrated improved working memory and signs of better attentional control. Teachers reported these students were more engaged, participatory, and used music as a tool to aid their learning – outcomes that traditional instruction alone did not achieve to the same degree.

From a practical standpoint, our findings suggest that even within the constraints of standard curricula, there is room to innovate and incorporate the arts to strengthen learning. For educators and curriculum developers, specific strategies emerge: using rhythmic patterns to teach mathematical fractions, employing songs to reinforce grammatical concepts or historical facts, and generally creating a more interactive, multisensory classroom environment. These strategies do not require extensive resources – often just teacher creativity and willingness – but the returns, in terms of student enthusiasm and understanding, can be significant. Furthermore, such integration addresses multiple educational goals simultaneously: improving test scores, fostering cognitive abilities like memory and inhibition, and nurturing soft skills such as collaboration and creativity.

For **teachers**, a major implication is that music can be a powerful ally in addressing diverse learning needs. In our study, students who typically struggled or were disengaged visibly flourished when music was introduced; this suggests that music-based approaches can help reach students who might not respond to conventional pedagogy. The enjoyment and novelty factor also rejuvenated classroom dynamics, making teaching and learning more pleasurable – an outcome that can reduce burnout and increase teacher satisfaction. We encourage teachers to experiment with small steps: perhaps start a class with a content-relevant song, or allow students to create a

short rap about a science topic. Such steps can build confidence in using music and reveal its impact on student recall and mood firsthand.

For **curriculum designers and school leaders**, these results advocate for institutional support of arts integration. Professional development opportunities could be provided for teachers to learn techniques of incorporating music and other arts into their lessons. Additionally, scheduling flexibility can be crucial – allowing a bit of extra time for interdisciplinary projects (like writing a math song) can pay off in mastery of the material. Administrators should note that our integration did not detract from core instructional time; rather, it made that time more effective. Thus, supporting such pedagogical approaches is aligned with academic improvement goals. The study also underscores the value of maintaining robust music and arts programs in schools, not only for their own sake but as catalysts for excellence in traditional subjects. Policymakers and educational authorities might consider frameworks where meeting arts education standards complements meeting math and literacy standards, recognizing the interplay between them.

In the realm of **educational research**, this study contributes to a nuanced understanding of how cognitive skills and academic learning intersect through arts integration. It reinforces the idea that educational interventions can be multidimensional – simultaneously targeting cognitive processes and content knowledge. Future research building on this work could expand into other subjects (e.g., using visual arts to teach geometry or drama to teach history) and evaluate long-term outcomes such as retention of knowledge and overall academic trajectories. Additionally, investigating neural mechanisms via educational neuroscience could illuminate how music engagement during learning modulates brain activity associated with memory and attention (as hinted by prior studies we discussed). Such interdisciplinary research would further validate and refine the use of music in pedagogy.

We acknowledge limitations such as sample size and short duration, but the consistency of quantitative improvements with qualitative observations gives us confidence in the robustness of our conclusions. It's noteworthy that we achieved these outcomes in a relatively short period and with everyday classroom teachers, not specialist researchers, delivering the intervention – this enhances the ecological validity and suggests scalability. Teachers with typical workloads and varied backgrounds managed to integrate music effectively; with more training and time, the outcomes could be even more pronounced.

In conclusion, *Integrating Music into Curriculum Design: Strategies for Enhancing Student Achievement and Cognitive Skills* has proven to be more than an aspirational slogan – it is a practical, evidence-based approach. By teaching through music, we tap into a fundamental human capacity and passion that can transform the classroom experience. Students not only learn – they *imbibe* knowledge through melody and rhythm, which appear to anchor learning in memory and meaning. As education strives to prepare well-rounded, intelligent, and creative individuals, the melding of arts and academics is a pathway to achieving those aims. We end with a reflection from

one of our student participants, who, when asked what he thought of the music-math lessons, said, *"I didn't know math could be this fun. It's like my brain sings the problems now."* In that poetic testament lies the essence of our findings: a singing brain is a learning brain. Embracing this harmony between music and learning could strike the right chord in education reform, benefitting students, teachers, and the wider learning community.

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Received: 06.15.2025
Revised: 06.18.2025
Accepted: 06.20.2025
Published: 06.24.2025