



MUSIC AND CULTURAL IDENTITY IN THE EARLY YEARS: AN EMPIRICAL APPROACH TO INTERCULTURAL LEARNING

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Abstract:

This study investigates the role of music as a medium for cultivating cultural identity and fostering intercultural understanding in early childhood education. Set against the backdrop of globalised education and multicultural societies, the research focuses on the integration of traditional and intercultural music within preschool settings and its influence on children's aesthetic perception, emotional expression, and social interaction. Drawing upon the theoretical frameworks of musical universality, intercultural education, and Csikszentmihalyi's Flow Theory, the study explores how musical engagement from diverse cultural traditions can enhance young learners' awareness of cultural diversity and support the development of an inclusive sense of identity. The empirical component of the research was conducted in January 2025 and involved 18 preschool-aged children. A series of music-based activities featuring traditional songs from Greece and France was designed to investigate children's responses and immersive experiences through qualitative observation. The findings reveal that intercultural music experiences not only stimulate aesthetic appreciation and emotional resonance but also promote empathy, collaborative attitudes, and openness to cultural difference. The presence of flow indicators during musical participation further suggests a deep, affective engagement with culturally embedded musical content. The study highlights the pedagogical value of music in shaping cultural identity and advocates for its systematic integration into preschool curricula as a pathway to inclusive and culturally responsive education.

Keywords: musical literacy, multiliteracies, intercultural education, cultural identity, music as cultural practice

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1. Research Background and Motivation

1.1 Background

In an increasingly interconnected and culturally diverse world, early childhood education bears the responsibility of laying the groundwork for inclusive, democratic, and globally conscious societies (UNESCO, 2019). As young children begin to shape their sense of self and the world around them, education systems are called to adopt pedagogical frameworks that promote intercultural awareness, empathy, and the celebration of diversity. Within this landscape, the concept of global universality becomes particularly relevant—a philosophical and educational ideal rooted in historical discourse since Socrates, who equated Greece with "the world" (Bowden, 2003).

Global universality, as developed in contemporary scholarship, is closely associated with internationalisation, cultural interconnectedness, and global responsibility (Green, 2012). Schattle (2007) defines it as a way of thinking and being across interconnected cities, regions, states, and international communities. In practical terms, it serves as a bridge between global citizenship and multicultural education, sharing core values such as cultural empathy and intercultural competence (Olson *et al.*, 2007). Educational initiatives inspired by this vision aim to cultivate individuals capable of engaging meaningfully with global challenges, diverse cultures, and transnational perspectives. Music, as an inherently cultural and universal form of expression, holds great potential in advancing these educational aims. The notion of *musical universality* highlights music's capacity to transcend boundaries while simultaneously expressing the unique values and identities of different cultures. Within the field of music education, the emergence of *World Music Pedagogy* has provided educators with tools to engage children in meaningful musical encounters that foster global awareness (Campbell, 2004; Schippers, 2010). World Music Pedagogy involves not only the study of musical genres from around the world but also the integration of culturally grounded listening, performing, and creating experiences into the classroom setting (Cantarelli Vita & Campbell, 2021).

According to Coppola and Campbell (2021), five dimensions define this pedagogical model: the integration of global music, attentive listening, active listening, participatory performance, and creative engagement. These stages support the development of musical understanding alongside cultural sensitivity. The role of the educator is to contextualise each musical piece—sharing the stories, values, and histories of the people behind the music—and to guide learners through a process that links sound with meaning and expression with identity (Campbell, 2018). In this context, the current study adopts an interdisciplinary perspective, informed by music pedagogy, intercultural education, and the developmental psychology of engagement. Drawing on Csikszentmihalyi's Flow Theory (1990), which describes the optimal state of focused and enjoyable immersion, the study investigates how traditional and intercultural music activities can trigger moments of flow in preschool children. This framework is particularly valuable in early childhood settings, where learning is deeply rooted in play,

emotional resonance, and embodied participation (Custodero, 2005). Through a qualitative activity featuring traditional songs from Greece and France, this research explores how musical engagement influences young children's aesthetic perception, emotional expression, and sense of cultural identity. The study highlights how flow experiences, enabled by culturally responsive music practices, can deepen intercultural understanding and reinforce the role of music as both a pedagogical and social bridge.

Ultimately, this paper contends that the intentional inclusion of intercultural and traditional music in early years curricula contributes not only to the creative and emotional development of children but also to the cultivation of empathy, critical thinking, and respect for difference. By positioning music as a core element of global and intercultural education, the study responds to the pressing need for educational models that are inclusive, reflective, and transformative.

1.2 The Importance of Cultural Experience in the Kindergarten Setting

The term experience refers to the knowledge acquired through practical engagement with an activity or through familiarity gained while performing one's professional duties. It is therefore considered knowledge attained through direct perception of phenomena, rather than through theoretical study (Sakarelis, 2023). Cultural experience, which may also be referred to as cultural-historical experience, denotes the experiential knowledge of culture and of elements bearing cultural significance (Vartzioti, 2005).

Through cultural experience, individuals are informed about the customs, traditions, and heritage of their own culture, as well as those of others, by means of experiential practices. At the same time, they begin to distinguish between the cultural habits and characteristics of different peoples. Furthermore, cultural experience enables them to identify similarities across cultures and to challenge rigid or stereotypical perceptions of others (Damanakis, 2000). Approaching culture through lived experience offers access to a deeper understanding of it, revealing its underlying norms without disregarding its uniqueness (Argyriou, 2013).

In the context of early childhood education, cultural experience can be facilitated effectively through music and various forms of art, such as dramatic play, traditional dances, and even puppet theatre. Anderson and Campbell (2010) describe these experiences as "living", as they enrich teaching within both multicultural and monocultural learning environments. Matthaopoulos (2012) argues that observation and engagement with cultural elements can guide children toward a conscious appreciation of a culture's history and traditions. This approach highlights the shared cultural features that define different communities, while also respecting the unique traits that shape each one's distinct identity (Matthaopoulos, 2012). More specifically, as Zygouris (2021) points out, incorporating folk tradition in early childhood education can raise children's awareness of their cultural values and contribute to the formation of their cultural identity. He emphasises that today's children, as recipients of cultural traditions and experiences, will one day become the carriers of their community's cultural heritage. According to Gaki (2019), the study of and engagement with traditional culture plays a

crucial role in fostering a shared framework of values and ideas that are collectively accepted within a society. This process extends beyond the mere preservation of cultural practices to include the individual's capacity to locate themselves within both spatial-temporal and social identity frameworks.

1.3 Intercultural Music Education and Preschool Pedagogical Practices

The integration of intercultural education into early years learning has become a vital concern in educational discourse, particularly in response to the increasing cultural diversity of modern classrooms. Early childhood education offers a unique opportunity to lay the foundations for inclusive and socially responsive learning environments. In this context, intercultural pedagogies are not merely aspirational ideals but essential components of democratic, equitable education systems (Banks, 2009; Nieto, 2010). These pedagogies support reciprocal interaction among children from diverse cultural backgrounds, encouraging respect for diversity and promoting social cohesion from the earliest stages of development.

In the field of music education, intercultural approaches provide fertile ground for cultivating empathy, self-expression, and cultural awareness. Intercultural music education promotes active participation and inclusivity by inviting children to explore the music, stories, and traditions of diverse communities. It transcends the mere transmission of musical forms and becomes a medium through which cultural values, histories, and identities are exchanged and understood (Campbell, 2018; Abril, 2006). As Barrett (2005) notes, musical engagement is a deeply personal and social act, and when embedded within intercultural frameworks, it enables children to make meaningful connections between sound, identity, and community.

The evolution of intercultural education has been shaped by globalisation, migration, and the increasing presence of multilingual and multicultural student populations in schools. Interculturalism, as conceptualised by Gundara (in Palaiologou & Evangelou, 2011) and further developed by Markou (1991), is distinct from multiculturalism in that it emphasises dynamic interaction, co-learning, and mutual transformation. While multicultural education recognises the coexistence of cultures, intercultural education actively fosters engagement and shared understanding across cultural boundaries (UNESCO, 2006).

Within early childhood contexts, music functions as a uniquely embodied and experiential medium through which children encounter and explore cultural difference. As De Vries (2015) argues, musical play allows for participatory, non-verbal, and affective encounters with cultural narratives, creating a sense of belonging and interconnectedness. By engaging with music from various traditions through listening, movement, singing, and improvisation, young learners are introduced to the multiplicity of human expression and encouraged to reflect upon their own cultural situatedness (Karlsen & Westerlund, 2010).

This approach is grounded in both aesthetic and humanistic perspectives in music education. The aesthetic tradition values music for its intrinsic qualities and expressive

potential, while the humanistic perspective frames music as a vehicle for intercultural understanding and personal development (Elliott & Silverman, 2015; Westerlund, 2008). Intercultural music education bridges these paradigms by affirming the integrity of musical experiences while also recognising their embeddedness within cultural systems. Effective intercultural music pedagogy requires educators to act as facilitators of dialogue and discovery. Anderson and Campbell (2010) advocate for a pedagogy that privileges authenticity, respectful representation, and student agency. Teachers are encouraged to present music in its cultural context, engage learners in discussions about meaning and origin, and invite collaboration with culture bearers and local musicians. These strategies align with Freirean principles of critical pedagogy, whereby learners are positioned as co-constructors of knowledge in relation to their lived experiences (Freire, 1970; O'Toole, 2005). Furthermore, research indicates that early exposure to intercultural music not only enhances children's musical development but also contributes to broader educational goals, including intercultural competence, creativity, and emotional intelligence (Chen-Hafteck, 2007; Fung, 1995). Through such engagement, children develop the capacity to listen attentively, to respond empathetically, and to appreciate complexity in both music and human experience.

2. Literature Review

A growing body of literature affirms the pivotal role of early childhood education in fostering cultural awareness, identity development, and global citizenship. Scholars argue that the early years represent a critical period for the emergence of inclusive attitudes and intercultural competencies (Souto-Manning, 2013; Barrett *et al.*, 2019). Within this framework, music education has increasingly been recognised not only for its artistic and developmental benefits but also for its capacity to function as a medium for social and cultural learning (Abril, 2006; Bond, 2017).

The concept of global universality, historically rooted in philosophical discourse and now evolving through international educational policies, underpins much of the current discussion on intercultural education (Bowden, 2003; Green, 2012). Olson *et al.* (2007) highlight that both internationalisation and multicultural education share the aims of fostering cultural empathy and developing intercultural competence. These principles are closely aligned with efforts in music education to incorporate diverse cultural traditions in ways that promote mutual understanding and social cohesion.

World Music Pedagogy, as developed by Campbell (2004, 2018) and Schippers (2010), positions music from various global traditions as a valuable resource for inclusive education. Cantarelli Vita and Campbell (2021) argue that this approach serves as a gateway to global citizenship, emphasising the importance of attentive and active listening, participatory music-making, and culturally grounded interpretation. The five dimensions of World Music Pedagogy (Coppola & Campbell, 2021) provide a structured yet flexible model through which children can explore musical forms, practices, and meanings from a wide range of cultures. Moreover, scholars such as Westerlund and

Karlsen (2017) have highlighted the need for music education to transcend ethnocentric approaches, calling for decolonised pedagogical strategies that centre equity, diversity, and learners' lived experiences. These perspectives align with Barrett's (2020) vision of music education as a form of cultural participation, where children engage in identity negotiation through meaningful, context-rich musical interactions. At the same time, Csikszentmihalyi's (1990) Flow Theory has gained traction in educational research as a framework for understanding deep learning engagement. In the field of early childhood music education, Custodero (2005) has identified specific indicators of flow in young children's musical behaviours, such as focused attention, intrinsic motivation, and sustained interaction. More recently, Burnard (2016) has linked musical flow with creative agency, suggesting that flow states can nurture a sense of ownership and imaginative freedom in young learners.

The intersection of musical flow and intercultural content opens new avenues for fostering both aesthetic sensitivity and cultural awareness. When children are immersed in culturally diverse musical experiences that also engage their sense of curiosity and joy, they are more likely to internalise the values of empathy, inclusion, and respect for difference. Together, these theoretical perspectives support the central aim of this study: to examine how music, particularly from traditional and intercultural sources, can foster culturally inclusive learning environments in early childhood. By situating the research within current scholarly and pedagogical discourse, this review lays the foundation for a deeper exploration of the empirical dimensions of the study that follows.

3. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative, exploratory research design in order to examine how intercultural music experiences influence the development of aesthetic perception, emotional engagement, and cultural identity among preschool-aged children. The research was conducted in January 2025 in a private kindergarten setting located in Attica, Greece. Ethical approval was granted by the Department of Early Childhood Education and Educational Design at the University of the Aegean, and informed consent was obtained from all parents or guardians of participating children. The data collection process focused on the implementation of two structured music sessions, each centred around a traditional song from a different cultural context. The first activity involved the Greek folk song "Skoupa" from the island of Leros, while the second introduced the French piece "La Badoise". Both songs were selected based on their cultural distinctiveness, melodic simplicity, and rhythmic accessibility for preschool learners. The activities were designed according to the dimensions of World Music Pedagogy, incorporating attentive listening, movement, vocal exploration, and creative response. Children's behaviours and reactions were observed and documented using a qualitative observation protocol. Particular attention was paid to indicators of flow experience as outlined by Custodero (2005), such as focused attention, sustained engagement, spontaneous expression, and peer interaction. Observations were conducted by the lead

researcher and two early childhood educators who had received prior training in ethnographic observation and child-led documentation. Data were analysed thematically, following an inductive approach that allowed categories and patterns to emerge organically from the observed behaviours. The analysis focused on the relationship between musical engagement and expressions of aesthetic awareness, emotional resonance, and intercultural sensitivity. Findings were triangulated through cross-validation between observers and supported by reflective field notes taken during and after the sessions.

This methodological approach was chosen for its capacity to capture the richness and nuance of children's lived musical experiences within a naturalistic educational context. It also aligns with the broader aims of the study to prioritise children's voices, actions, and interpretations within a culturally responsive and inclusive pedagogical framework.

3.1 Research Sample

The sample consisted of 18 children aged between 4 and 5 years old, with a balance of gender representation. The selection of participants was based on their regular attendance and teacher assessments of developmental readiness to participate in guided music-based activities. The data collection process and the selection of the research sample constitute critical factors for the successful implementation of the study. The research on flow experience was conducted during a single teaching hour (12:00–13:00) on 8 January 2025. The two activities included in the study were carried out within the classroom of the Skala Oropou Kindergarten, providing a controlled environment for systematic data observation. The total number of children participating in the study was eighteen (18). Of these, ten (10) were in pre-kindergarten, while the remaining eight (8) were in kindergarten. Regarding gender, the sample consisted of eleven (11) girls and seven (7) boys. More specifically, the eight kindergarten-aged children included four (4) girls and four (4) boys, while the pre-kindergarten group comprised seven (7) girls and three (3) boys. This sample was analysed in order to explore the effects of and responses to the musical activities, within the framework of intercultural education and early childhood pedagogy. The age distribution of the sample presents a balance between kindergarten and pre-kindergarten children (see Figure 4), allowing for comparative analysis of the reactions between the two age groups. The slight predominance of girls (61.1%) over boys (38.9%) is a factor that may be considered during the interpretation of the findings, particularly if gender-based differences in response are observed. The choice of this specific kindergarten, as well as the decision to conduct the study in a controlled classroom setting, ensures the validity of the data, as it minimises the influence of external factors that might otherwise affect children's behaviour. Overall, the demographic composition of the sample offers a representative foundation for examining the impact of musical activities on the flow experience of young children, taking into account both age and gender variables.

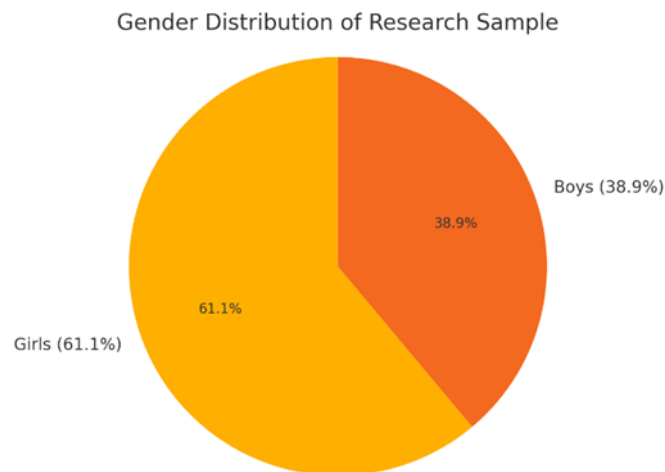


Figure 1: Gender distribution

3.2 Research Aims and Questions

This study aims to expand the role of traditional music and culturally diverse musical stimuli in shaping the aesthetic perception and response of preschool children. Within this framework, the research focuses on documenting and analysing young children's aesthetic experiences through music, highlighting the significance of cultural experience and musical engagement as vehicles for cultivating cultural awareness and fostering intercultural learning.

A key objective of the study is to explore how flow experiences may emerge during targeted cultural activities involving music, viewing such experiences not as incidental but as integral to the preschool educational process. The research investigates the potential of flow to occur during listening and interactive activities involving traditional and intercultural music, positioning flow as a pedagogical tool for enhancing engagement and deep learning in early childhood. By doing so, the study seeks to contribute valuable insights into how both traditional and intercultural music can support aesthetic development and promote intercultural education in early years settings. It underscores the role of music in advancing cultural consciousness, mutual understanding, and inclusive educational practices through embodied and affective musical experiences. Based on these aims, the study seeks to address the following research questions:

- How do preschool-aged children perceive and interpret traditional music in terms of aesthetic response?

This question explores children's sensory and emotional engagement with traditional musical forms and their ability to assign meaning to such experiences.

- What is the nature of preschool children's musical reception and response during listening experiences with traditional music?

This involves examining both verbal and non-verbal behaviours, gestures, emotional reactions, and attentional patterns observed during musical exposure.

- How do preschool children receive and respond to musical stimuli from culturally diverse musical traditions?

This question investigates the comparative effects of intercultural musical material on children's aesthetic experience, emotional connection, and flow-related engagement.

Through the exploration of these questions, the study aims to shed light on how intercultural and traditional music can play a formative role in preschool education—not only as an artistic experience but as a pedagogical strategy for promoting diversity, inclusion, and cultural literacy from an early age.

3.3 Qualitative Criteria for Survey Design

The effectiveness and success of the teaching plan were evaluated through the lens of how and to what extent the participating preschool children entered into a state of flow during the musical activities. To ensure a more rigorous and valid interpretation of the data, the analysis was guided by qualitative indicators associated with flow experience, as described in the literature (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Custodero, 2005), and by the implementation of an authentic assessment approach using structured questions and reflective dialogue.

- **Table of Qualitative Criteria:** A dedicated observation tool was used, grounded in the core characteristics of flow—such as focused attention, enjoyment, intrinsic motivation, and seamless involvement in the activity (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). This method facilitated the classification of behavioural and affective indicators relevant to flow, thereby supporting a structured analysis of the children's engagement during the musical sessions. The criteria also enabled a clearer synthesis of research outcomes within the specific intercultural educational context (Custodero, 2002).
- **Question-and-Answer Method:** This reflective dialogue took place immediately following the musical activities and encouraged the children to articulate their experiences, challenges, and emotional responses. This child-centred method of authentic assessment is consistent with early years educational practice that values learners' voices and lived experiences (Wiggins, 1998; Barrett, 2006). The children described the difficulties they encountered and the strategies they used to overcome them. Moreover, they were invited to reflect on their aesthetic perception and enjoyment, particularly in relation to the traditional music they encountered—a key component in fostering early musical meaning-making and intercultural responsiveness (Swanwick, 1999; Barrett, 2011).

The findings of the flow-based research, which pertain to the concept of “flow,” are directly linked to the study of optimal experience as it occurs under conditions of high performance and enjoyment within the educational environment (Custodero, 2005). The analysis of the flow-related data is grounded in the observation and documentation of such experiences, and in the evaluation of observable behavioural indicators, as proposed by Custodero (2005), which constitute the experience of flow in educational contexts.

- **Indicators of Challenge-Seeking:** Self-assignment, self-correction, voluntary gesture
- **Indicators of Challenge-Monitoring:** Anticipation, extension, elaboration

- **Indicators of Social Framing:** Awareness of peers and adults

The identification and categorisation of these indicators led to the development of qualitative criteria, which were applied to each activity carried out during the research. This facilitated a detailed analysis of the collected data and supported the interpretation of children's engagement and flow experiences throughout the musical interactions.

The above criteria (see Figure 2) outline the observable indicators of flow experience as adapted from Custodero's (2005) framework, categorised into three overarching dimensions: challenge-seeking, challenge-monitoring, and social framing. These criteria were used to analyse children's behaviour during the musical activities in a structured and developmentally sensitive manner:

- **The challenge-seeking indicators**—self-assignment, self-correction, and voluntary gesture—reflect the child's agency in approaching the task, demonstrating initiative and personal engagement. These behaviours indicate that the children were not merely following instructions but were actively shaping their own experience. For example, voluntary gestures may manifest as spontaneous bodily movements in response to music, suggesting immersion and creative expression.
- **The challenge-monitoring indicators**—anticipation, extension, and elaboration—capture the child's cognitive engagement with the musical material. These markers signify a deeper investment in the process, as the child attempts to extend or refine their participation. Anticipation, for instance, may be evident when a child predicts the musical flow or prepares to join in a rhythmic sequence, showing internalised understanding and sustained focus.
- **The social framing indicators**—awareness of peers and adults—highlight the interpersonal context in which flow occurs. Rather than being isolated experiences, flow moments in early childhood are often embedded in social interaction. Children's awareness of others may take the form of synchronised movement, shared eye contact, or turn-taking in musical play, revealing their sensitivity to the collaborative and communicative dimensions of the activity.

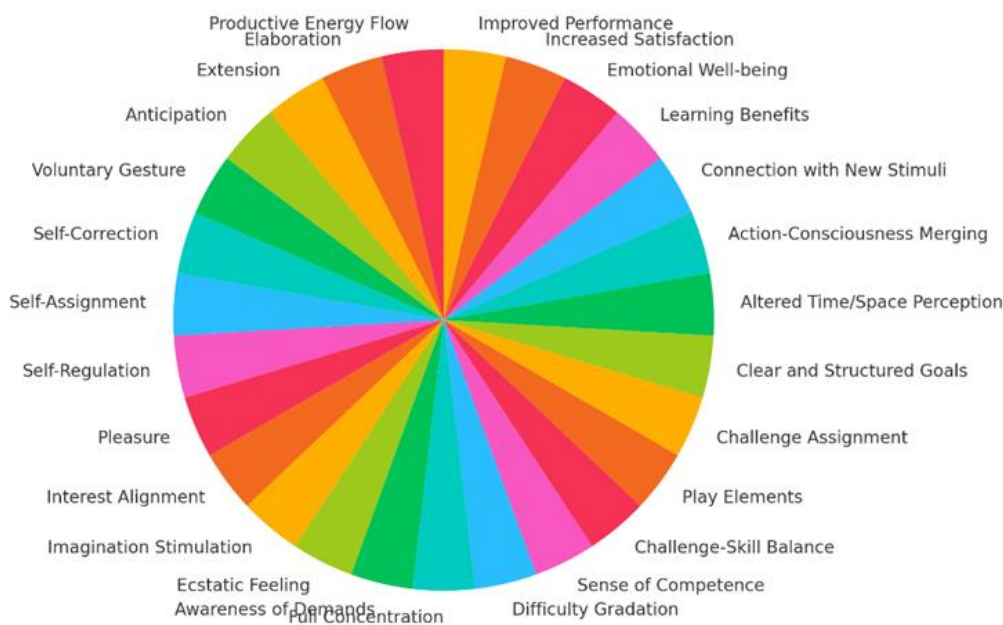


Figure 2: Qualitative criteria of flow-based educational research

Collectively, these indicators offer a nuanced view of the children's flow experiences, integrating cognitive, emotional, and social elements. Their presence supports the conclusion that intercultural music activities can create fertile conditions for immersive, meaningful learning in early childhood settings.

Figure 3 illustrates the thematic categorisation of the qualitative indicators used to assess flow experiences during the intercultural music activities.

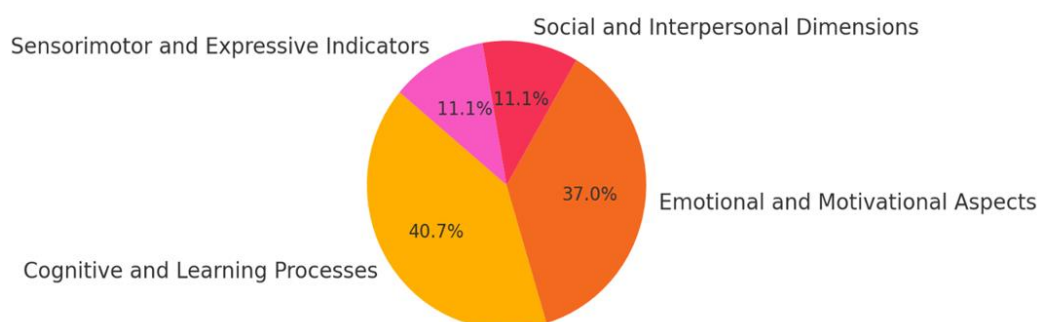


Figure 3: Thematic Grouping of Qualitative Flow Criteria in Early Childhood Music Education

The categorisation allows for a clearer understanding of the multifaceted nature of flow as experienced by preschool children, structured around four main domains:

- **Cognitive and Learning Processes (40.7%):** This group includes indicators related to focused engagement, learning progression, task clarity, and cognitive challenge. These criteria are essential for supporting metacognitive development and goal-directed behaviour in early childhood learning environments.

- **Emotional and Motivational Aspects (37.0%):** Encompassing aspects such as pleasure, emotional well-being, satisfaction, and intrinsic motivation, this domain highlights the affective depth of children's musical involvement. Flow, in this sense, emerges as a joyful and self-rewarding experience that fosters a love for learning.
- **Social and Interpersonal Dimensions (11.1%):** Indicators in this category refer to the role of social interaction, imaginative play, and energetic group dynamics, emphasising the communal and cooperative nature of music-making in early years education.
- **Sensorimotor and Expressive Indicators (11.1%):** These indicators reflect the embodiment of musical flow through physical gesture, spatial awareness, and deep immersion in the activity. They reveal the kinesthetic and sensory qualities of flow, which are particularly significant in early childhood.

Together, these categories underline the holistic nature of flow experiences in music education, demonstrating that meaningful engagement in musical activity nurtures not only intellectual development but also emotional, social, and physical growth. By combining observational data with reflective feedback from the children, the study was able to present a nuanced account of how intercultural music activities contributed to the emergence of flow states and aesthetic awareness in early childhood.

Figure 4 illustrates the percentage of children who demonstrated specific behavioural and emotional indicators associated with flow experience during the implementation of intercultural music activities. The qualitative data were collected through structured observation protocols, informed by flow theory (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) and adapted to early childhood contexts (Custodero, 2005).

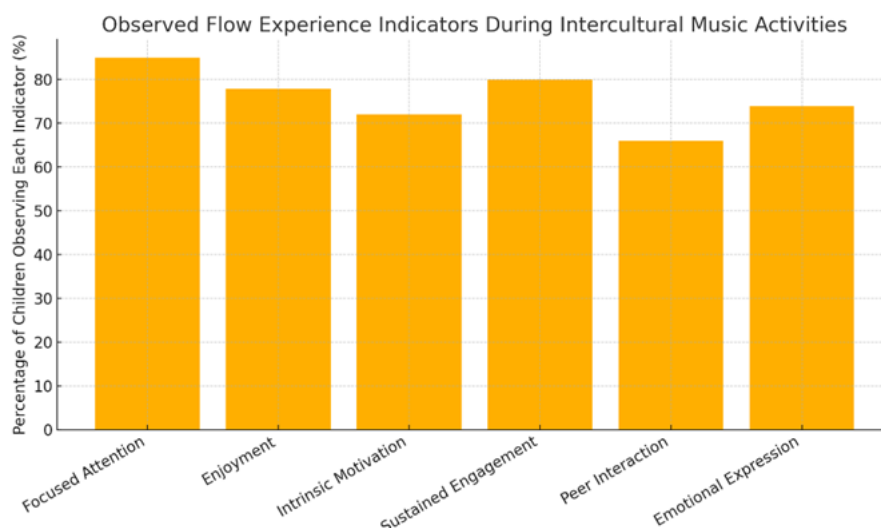


Figure 4: Observed Flow Experience Indicators During Intercultural Music Activities

The most frequently observed indicators were focused attention (85%) and sustained engagement (80%), both of which reflect a high degree of immersion and involvement in the musical tasks. These findings suggest that the design of the activities

effectively captured the children's attention and sustained their participation over time. Notably, enjoyment (78%) and emotional expression (74%) were also prominent, highlighting the affective dimension of the children's musical experience and the role of traditional music in stimulating emotional response. Intrinsic motivation was identified in 72% of participants, particularly evident through spontaneous movement, repetition, and self-initiated musical expression. Peer interaction (66%) was slightly lower, yet still significant, and may reflect moments of collaborative engagement during group listening and performance. Overall, the prevalence of these flow indicators supports the pedagogical potential of intercultural music activities in early childhood education.

3.4 Flow Activity Quantitative Analysis

- **Observation Activity A:** Identifying Qualitative Indicators of Flow Experience in a Preschool Music Activity Based on a Traditional Custom from Leros
- **Observation Context:** 8 January 2025 (duration: 15 minutes)
- **Structure:** Group-based musical activity incorporating a traditional song from the island of Leros
- **Number of Participants:** 18 preschool children (aged 4–5)

- **Performance and Satisfaction**

In the domain of performance and satisfaction, the findings reveal a strong correlation between musical engagement and positive developmental outcomes. Fourteen out of eighteen children demonstrated improved performance, exhibiting heightened productivity and creativity, although a few were less responsive due to signs of fatigue. Additionally, fifteen children appeared deeply immersed in the activity, displaying high levels of focus, enjoyment, and emotional satisfaction—key indicators of flow. Notably, seventeen children exhibited enhanced cooperation and communication skills, underlining the activity's pedagogical value and its potential to support both social and cognitive development in early childhood contexts.

Figure 5 visualises the key indicators related to performance and satisfaction during the activity. It shows that 14 out of 18 children demonstrated improved performance, 15 out of 18 exhibited increased satisfaction, indicating a high level of emotional engagement and 17 out of 18 developed cooperation and communication skills, underscoring the strong educational value of the activity. This distribution supports the argument that flow-oriented, culturally embedded musical activities are highly effective in promoting both cognitive and affective outcomes in early childhood education.

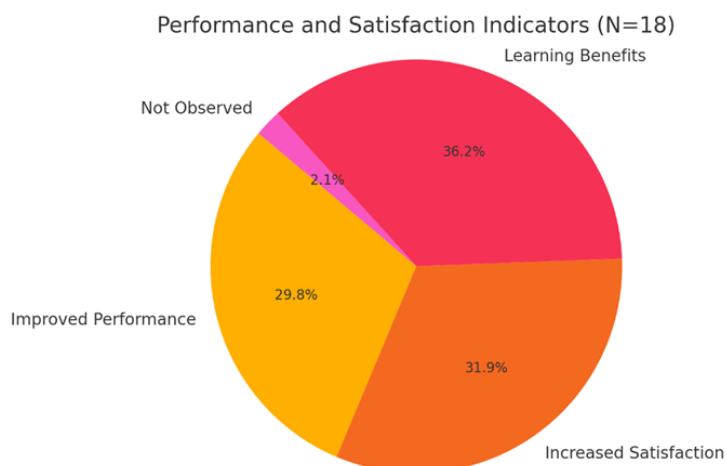


Figure 5: Performance and Satisfaction Indicators

The data confirm that such experiences not only promote aesthetic and cultural awareness but also foster deep, joyful, and self-directed learning among young children.

- **Emotional and Psychological Well-being**

The emotional and psychological well-being of the children was strongly supported during the activity, as evidenced by several flow-related indicators. Fifteen out of eighteen children exhibited signs of emotional well-being, such as joy, satisfaction, and a sense of accomplishment. An equal number visibly experienced pleasure and enjoyment throughout the session, highlighting the affective impact of the musical engagement. Notably, sixteen children appeared to enter a state of deep flow, characterised by a temporary loss of time and spatial awareness—an essential marker of immersive, meaningful participation. These findings underscore the role of music as a catalyst for emotional enrichment and psychological fulfilment in early childhood learning.

Figure 6 visualises the emotional and psychological well-being indicators observed during the preschool music activity. It shows the proportion of children experiencing emotional well-being, pleasure, and a deep flow state, illustrating the positive impact of the activity on their affective engagement.

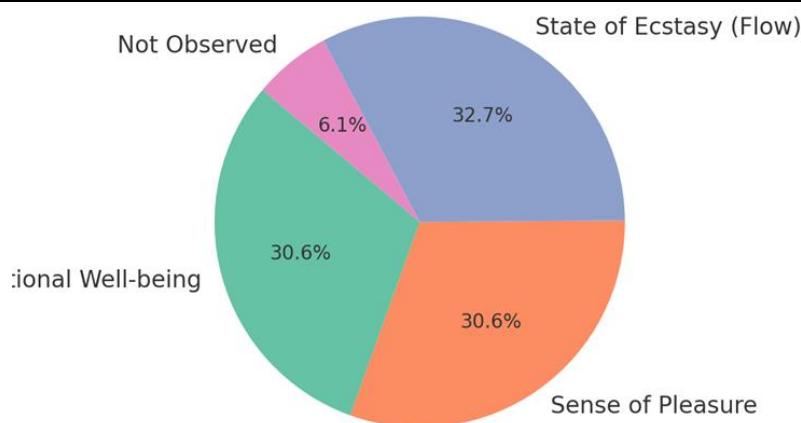


Figure 6: Emotional and psychological well-being indicators

- **Structure and Goals**

The structure and goals of the activity were clearly defined, with objectives that were both comprehensible and achievable—key components for facilitating flow experiences as outlined in Csikszentmihalyi’s theory. The task design incorporated appropriately challenging elements, allowing children to engage meaningfully without being overwhelmed. Notably, 16 out of 18 children demonstrated optimal involvement, suggesting a well-calibrated balance between the difficulty of the task and their developmental skills. This equilibrium was crucial in maintaining their motivation and sustaining their focus throughout the session.

Figure 7 visualises the structural components of the activity in relation to flow conditions. It shows that all children were provided with clear, structured goals and appropriately challenging tasks, while 16 out of 18 children successfully engaged with tasks that balanced challenge and skill—an essential condition for the flow experience.

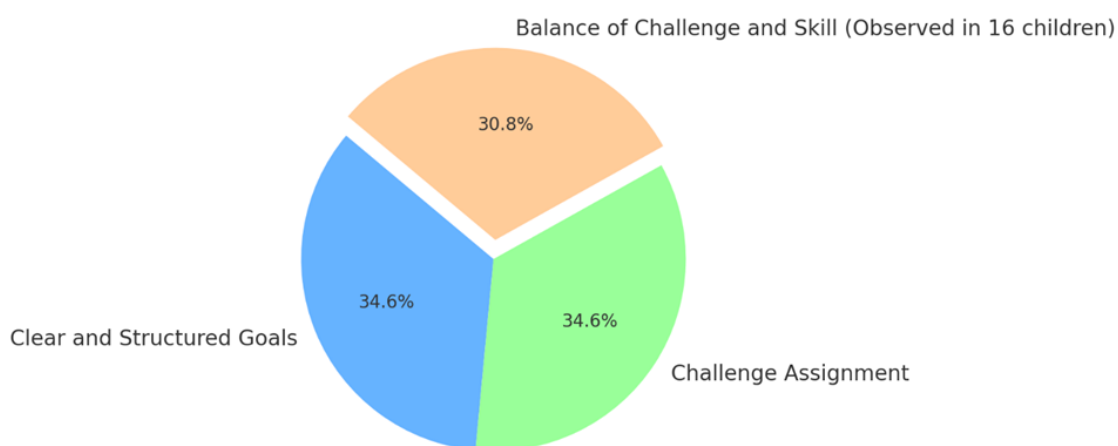


Figure 7: Structure and Goal Alignment in Flow-Based Activity

- **Autonomy and Self-Regulation**

The dimension of autonomy and self-regulation was strongly reflected in the children’s behaviour during the session. Fifteen out of eighteen children demonstrated full concentration, remaining deeply focused without distraction. Sixteen children

displayed a clear awareness of the activity's demands, indicating a mature understanding of the task structure. Moreover, seventeen children exhibited a merging of action and consciousness—an essential marker of flow—through synchronised movements and heightened responsiveness to the music and group interaction, highlighting their active engagement and self-directed participation.

Findings from Figure 8 have shown that during the activity, 15 out of 18 children demonstrated full concentration, indicating their complete absorption in the task. Sixteen children were aware of the task demands, showcasing an understanding of what was expected from them. Notably, 17 children exhibited a merging of action and consciousness, where their movements and awareness were closely synchronised—a key indicator of flow. These findings suggest that the activity effectively supported the development of autonomy and self-regulation, critical components of meaningful learning experiences in early childhood settings.

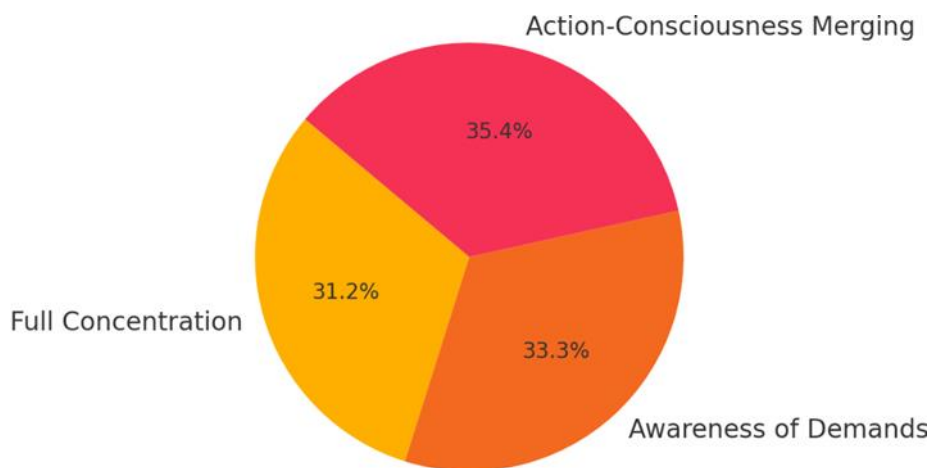


Figure 8: Autonomy and Self-Regulation in Preschool Music Activity

- **Creativity and Imagination**

The activity strongly stimulated creativity and imagination among the participating children. Spontaneous verbal expressions and physical gestures indicated imaginative engagement, while 16 out of 18 children demonstrated deep involvement, closely aligning the task with their personal interests. Additionally, the introduction of new and unfamiliar musical elements captured and sustained the children's attention, reflecting the activity's capacity to foster cognitive flexibility and imaginative exploration—hallmarks of both aesthetic experience and intercultural learning in early childhood education.

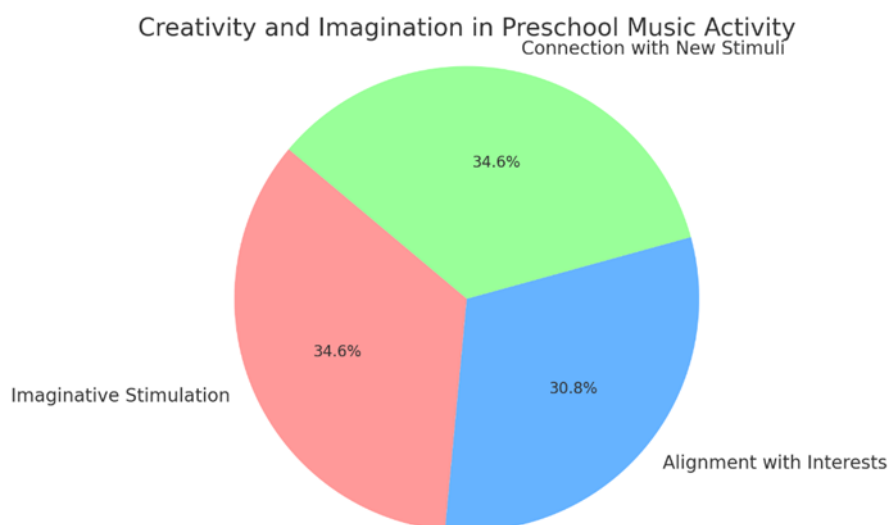


Figure 9: Creativity and Imagination in Preschool Music Activity

The activity fostered creativity and imagination among the children in several significant ways. Imaginative stimulation was evident through spontaneous verbal and physical responses, demonstrating the children's engagement beyond the task's basic requirements. A majority of the children (16 out of 18) aligned strongly with the activity's content, suggesting that it resonated with their personal interests and promoted deeper emotional and cognitive involvement. Furthermore, the integration of novel stimuli successfully captured and sustained the children's attention, showcasing how the introduction of new cultural and musical elements can enrich early learning environments by encouraging exploratory behaviours and imaginative expression.

- **Temporal and Spatial Perception**

The activity fostered creativity and imagination among the children in several significant ways. Imaginative stimulation was evident through spontaneous verbal and physical responses, demonstrating the children's engagement beyond the task's basic requirements. A majority of the children (16 out of 18) aligned strongly with the activity's content, suggesting that it resonated with their personal interests and promoted deeper emotional and cognitive involvement. Furthermore, the integration of novel stimuli successfully captured and sustained the children's attention, showcasing how the introduction of new cultural and musical elements can enrich early learning environments by encouraging exploratory behaviours and imaginative expression.

- **Play Elements**

The presence of play elements within the activity significantly contributed to children's motivation, engagement, and enjoyment. The playful structure encouraged a relaxed yet focused learning environment, fostering intrinsic interest. Notably, 16 out of 18 children exhibited voluntary gestures, indicating self-initiated actions and a sense of agency. Additionally, the same number of children channelled their energy productively,

demonstrating creativity, coordination, and purposeful movement. These observations suggest that incorporating playful components into music-based intercultural learning can enhance emotional involvement and reinforce a sense of autonomy and creative expression—both essential for achieving and sustaining flow states in early childhood education.

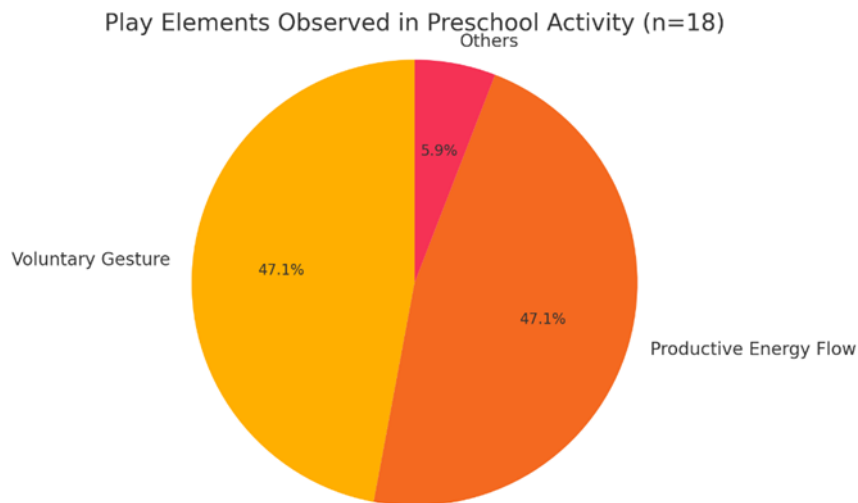


Figure 10: Play Elements Observed in Preschool Activity

The data suggest that elements of play significantly enriched the preschool activity. Sixteen out of eighteen children demonstrated voluntary gestures, indicating a high level of autonomy and willingness to engage without external prompting. Similarly, sixteen children showed productive energy flow, creatively and effectively using their physical and cognitive resources. These behaviours align closely with the characteristics of playful learning and reinforce the role of music-based activities in fostering enjoyment, motivation, and agency in early childhood settings. The pie chart visually confirms that play was a dominant feature of the session. The integration of play elements into the observed musical activity played a decisive role in enhancing the children’s motivation, engagement, and emotional well-being.

As illustrated in Figure 10, sixteen out of eighteen children demonstrated voluntary gestures—an indicator of self-initiated, autonomous participation. This behaviour reflects a high level of agency and internal motivation, highlighting the significance of playful learning environments in early childhood education. Equally important was the productive use of energy by the same number of children, who channelled their physical and cognitive efforts into the activity through coordinated and creative expression. These observations resonate with the theoretical framework of playful learning, which posits that children are more likely to remain engaged and derive enjoyment when the learning process involves exploration, spontaneity, and joy (Whitebread *et al.*, 2012). The presence of such behaviours not only supports emotional and cognitive development but also reinforces key conditions of the flow experience—such as enjoyment, focused attention, and autonomy (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990).

- **Challenge and Difficulty**

The activity demonstrated a well-calibrated gradation of difficulty, presenting tasks that were sufficiently challenging to stimulate engagement without causing frustration. This balance allowed children to operate within their zone of proximal development, encouraging growth without discouragement. Notably, 15 out of 18 children displayed a clear sense of competence and self-assurance in tackling the tasks, which is critical for fostering resilience, motivation, and a positive learning disposition in early childhood education. Findings on Figure 11 "Challenge and Difficulty Indicators" reveal that the structured progression of task complexity effectively supported the children's engagement without overwhelming them. Specifically, 15 out of 18 children exhibited a strong sense of competence, confidently navigating the activity and demonstrating self-assurance in their abilities. This balance between challenge and skill is a critical component of flow theory, fostering motivation and sustained participation. The visual representation further underscores the predominance of positive responses, highlighting the effectiveness of the activity design in promoting developmental growth through manageable challenges.

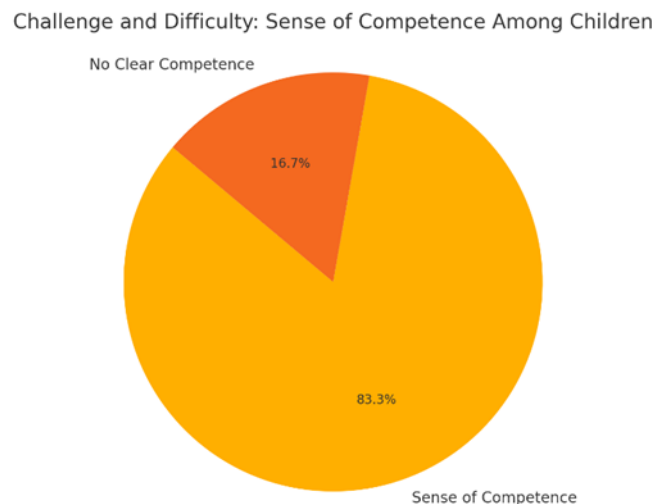


Figure 11: Challenge And Difficulty Indicators

The dimension of “Challenge and Difficulty” emerged as a critical factor in shaping children’s engagement and developmental outcomes during the musical activity. The structured progression of tasks demonstrated a well-calibrated level of difficulty, which successfully maintained the children’s interest and attention without causing cognitive overload or emotional distress. Operating within Vygotsky’s concept of the “zone of proximal development,” the activity offered opportunities for children to extend their skills while feeling safe and capable within the learning environment.

As illustrated in Figure 11, fifteen out of eighteen participants exhibited a strong sense of competence, suggesting that the challenges presented were appropriately matched to their developmental level. This finding aligns closely with Csikszentmihalyi’s flow theory, which posits that optimal engagement occurs when challenges are balanced

with one's skill level. Such conditions not only sustain motivation and enjoyment but also cultivate a growth-oriented mindset in young learners.

- **Expectation and Extension**

The research findings highlight the significance of the "Expectation and Extension" dimension in fostering meaningful engagement and flow among preschool children during intercultural musical activities. A notable 16 out of 18 participants demonstrated clear anticipation and eagerness, indicating that the activity successfully stimulated forward-looking engagement and emotional readiness. Although no material extension or transformation of the musical content occurred during the session itself, the pedagogical strategy of post-activity elaboration through reflective questioning proved crucial. This reflective dialogue enabled children to articulate their experiences, process emotional responses, and consolidate learning outcomes related to both musical structure and cultural meaning. The continuation of the learning process beyond the core activity enhanced cognitive and emotional involvement, supporting the development of sustained flow states. Observed behaviours—including deep concentration, joy, autonomy, and a dissociation from conventional time perception—reflect a high level of immersion consistent with Csikszentmihalyi's (1990) flow theory. The activity also aligned closely with children's interests and provided a balanced level of challenge, which further facilitated optimal learning conditions.

Overall, the findings underscore the value of integrating traditional musical elements and intercultural themes into early childhood curricula. The strong presence of expectation, coupled with meaningful post-activity reflection, suggests that such musical interventions can promote deeper learning, emotional literacy, and intercultural awareness. As a result, the activity not only supported individual development but also enhanced the children's collective cultural engagement and sense of belonging.

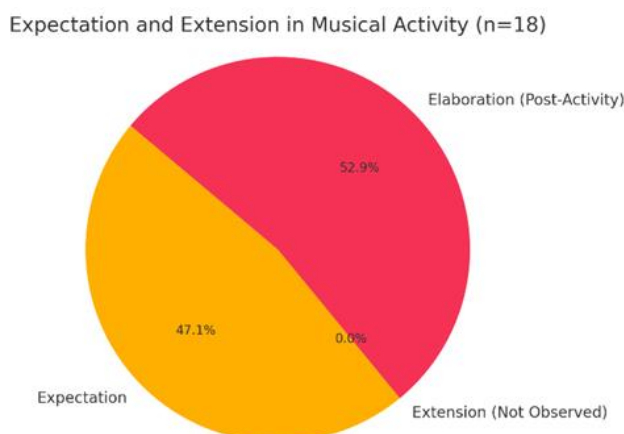


Figure 11: Challenge and Difficulty Indicators

- **Observation Activity B:** Identifying Qualitative Indicators of Flow Experience in a Preschool Music Activity Based on a Traditional Custom from France
- **Observation Context:** 8 January 2025 (duration: 15 minutes)

- **Structure:** Group-based musical activity incorporating a traditional children's dance from France
- **Number of Participants:** 18 preschool children (aged 4–5)

- **Performance and Satisfaction**

The activity fostered notable levels of engagement and fulfilment among the children. The results demonstrate the positive impact of the musical activity on young children's engagement, performance, and social development. Despite the potential challenge of fatigue following a prior session, 13 out of 18 children (72.2%) displayed improved performance, successfully participating in the musical tasks with creativity and focus. Notably, 16 children (88.9%) exhibited high levels of satisfaction, remaining deeply immersed and emotionally content throughout the session. These affective indicators highlight the role of music in promoting emotional well-being and intrinsic motivation in early learning contexts. Additionally, 17 children (94.4%) developed enhanced social interaction skills, particularly in the areas of cooperation and communication. This strong social component reflects the inherently collaborative nature of music-making, especially when situated within culturally meaningful activities. The findings suggest that structured musical experiences serve as effective vehicles for socio-emotional and cognitive development in preschool education.

As illustrated in Figure 12, the balanced presence of performance, satisfaction, and social learning indicators points to the multidimensional benefits of integrating music into early years curricula. Overall, the data reinforce the pedagogical potential of intercultural music activities to support holistic development and create meaningful, engaging, and inclusive learning environments.

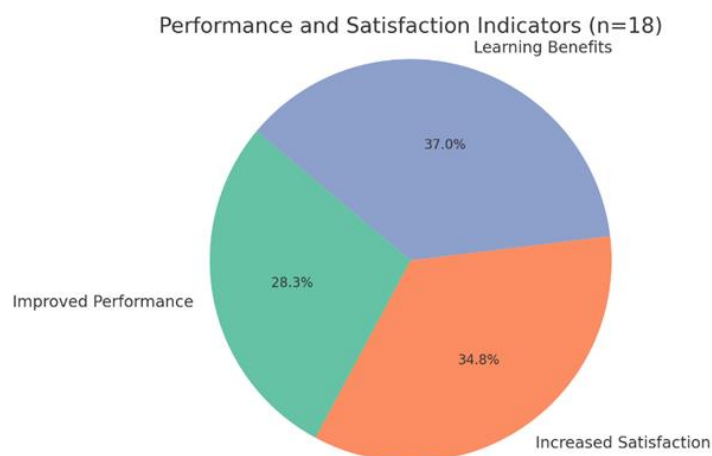


Figure 12: Performance and Satisfaction Indicators

- **Emotional and Psychological Well-being**

The dimension of emotional and psychological well-being was notably evident throughout the activity, with the majority of children demonstrating positive affective responses. Specifically, 14 out of 18 children expressed emotional well-being through

visible signs of joy, comfort, and engagement, though a slight decline was observed due to signs of fatigue following the prior session. A higher number — 16 children — displayed a clear sense of pleasure, remaining attentive and emotionally satisfied during the activity. Furthermore, 14 children appeared to enter a state of flow, characterised by a diminished awareness of time and space, indicating deep immersion and psychological absorption. These findings (Figure 13) suggest that the musical activity not only stimulated emotional satisfaction but also supported the emergence of profound experiential engagement, reinforcing the value of music as a vehicle for emotional development and psychological presence in early childhood education.

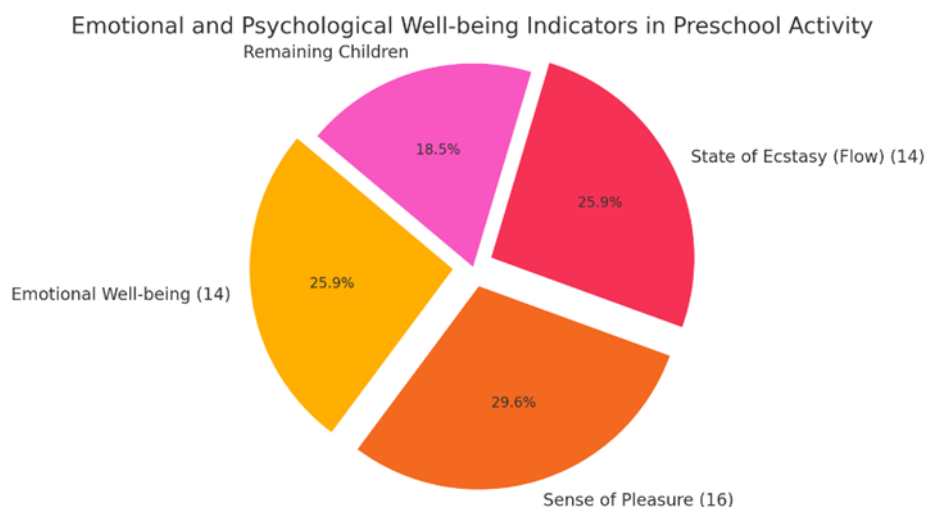


Figure 13: Emotional and Psychological Well-being Indicators

The findings related to emotional and psychological well-being highlight the significant impact that an intercultural music-based activity can have on the emotional state of preschool-aged children. Specifically, 14 out of 18 children exhibited signs of positive emotional states, such as joy and a sense of fulfilment, while 16 children experienced visible pleasure and satisfaction during the session. This high proportion indicates that music, as a pedagogical tool, supports not only cognitive but also emotional development in early childhood. Of particular note is the observation of flow-related phenomena, with 14 children showing characteristics associated with flow experiences, such as loss of awareness of time and space and complete absorption in the activity. The experience of flow is regarded as essential for experiential and meaningful learning, as it enhances emotional engagement and creates favourable conditions for strengthening self-perception and creativity. These findings support the view that the integration of musical elements from different cultures, when pedagogically structured, can effectively promote psychological well-being and contribute to the development of emotionally resilient and socially aware learners from an early age. Music, therefore, emerges not merely as an artistic or recreational practice, but as a powerful vehicle for emotional enrichment and holistic education in intercultural early childhood settings.

- **Structure and Goals**

Findings (Figure 14) illustrate the distribution of engagement related to structure and goal-setting within the observed musical activity. All children (18 out of 18) participated in activities with clear, structured goals and appropriately assigned challenges, reflecting thoughtful instructional design aligned with flow theory. Notably, 16 children (88.9%) demonstrated a balanced engagement between task difficulty and their own skill levels. This high level of alignment confirms the importance of structured yet flexible pedagogical approaches in early childhood settings. When activities are tailored to provide achievable challenges, children are more likely to experience motivation, sustained concentration, and developmental growth. The structure and goals of the activity were carefully planned to align with principles of flow theory, providing a clear and purposeful framework that supported children's engagement. The goals were clearly defined and achievable, enabling participants to understand the expectations and navigate the activity with confidence. A variety of appropriately scaled challenges.

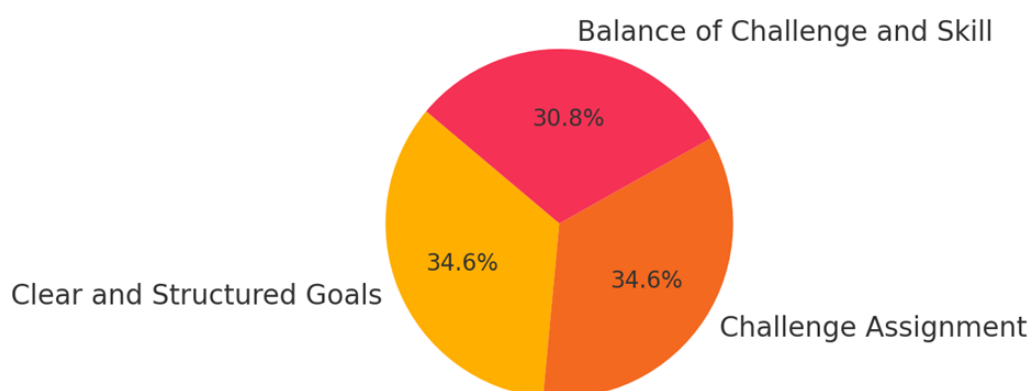


Figure 14: Structure and Goals Indicators

The results related to the structural design of the musical activity highlight the significant role of clearly defined goals and appropriately calibrated challenges in supporting optimal engagement in early childhood learning environments. The fact that all participants (18 out of 18) engaged with tasks that had clearly articulated objectives demonstrates the effectiveness of structured planning aligned with the principles of flow theory (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). The presence of well-defined goals enabled children to understand what was expected of them and to work towards specific outcomes with confidence. Importantly, 16 of the 18 children (88.9%) exhibited a clear balance between the level of challenge and their individual skill sets. This equilibrium is essential for maintaining motivation and avoiding both boredom and frustration—two factors that can inhibit sustained engagement and learning. Such balance also indicates that the activity successfully operated within each child's zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978), promoting both competence and autonomy. Findings reinforce the pedagogical value of combining clear instructional intentions with adaptable learning tasks. When learning activities are structured yet responsive to children's developmental stages and capabilities, they are more likely to foster concentration, emotional

satisfaction, and deeper cognitive involvement. In music-based intercultural education, this balance is particularly crucial, as it allows children to engage meaningfully with both familiar and unfamiliar cultural material, thereby promoting not only musical growth but also intercultural awareness and inclusive participation.

- **Autonomy and Self-Regulation**

Findings visually represent the distribution of autonomy and self-regulation indicators among the preschool participants. Out of 18 children, 14 (77.8%) demonstrated full concentration, maintaining consistent focus throughout the activity. A higher proportion—16 children (88.9%)—showed a clear awareness of the demands and expectations of the task, suggesting strong cognitive engagement. Additionally, 15 children (83.3%) exhibited a merging of action and consciousness, indicating a synchronised and embodied flow experience. These findings underscore the significance of structured, culturally enriched music activities in fostering self-regulatory capacities and cognitive immersion in early childhood education.

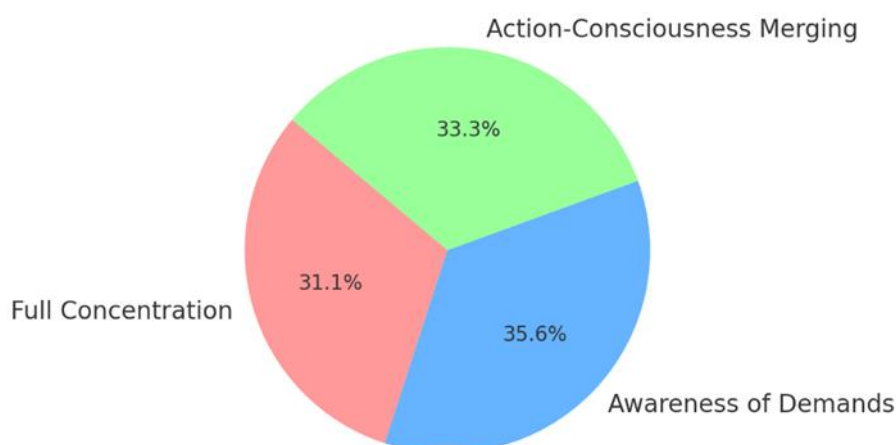


Figure 15: Autonomy and Self-Regulation Indicators

The dimension of autonomy and self-regulation was strongly reflected in the children's behaviour during the musical activity. Fourteen out of eighteen children demonstrated full concentration, maintaining sustained attention without distraction—a key indicator of deep engagement. Furthermore, sixteen children exhibited a clear awareness of the demands and expectations of the task, suggesting they were cognitively attuned to the structure and goals of the activity. Notably, fifteen children displayed a merging of action and consciousness, where their movements and responses appeared instinctively aligned with their awareness and intent. This synchrony is a hallmark of the flow experience, as defined by Csikszentmihalyi (1990), and signals the presence of intrinsic motivation and meaningful involvement. These observations confirm that the activity supported not only emotional and social development, but also the emergence of critical executive functions such as focus, self-regulation, and intentional action—skills essential for early childhood learning and long-term educational success.

- **Creativity and Imagination**

Findings illustrate the distribution of creativity and imagination indicators observed during the preschool musical activity. All children demonstrated imaginative stimulation and engagement with new cultural stimuli, highlighting their openness to novel experiences and the interpretive richness of the session. Additionally, 16 out of 18 children showed a strong alignment between the activity and their personal interests, indicating high levels of intrinsic motivation and personal investment. Findings underscore the critical role of culturally diverse, play-based music activities in fostering creativity, emotional expression, and sustained engagement in early childhood education.

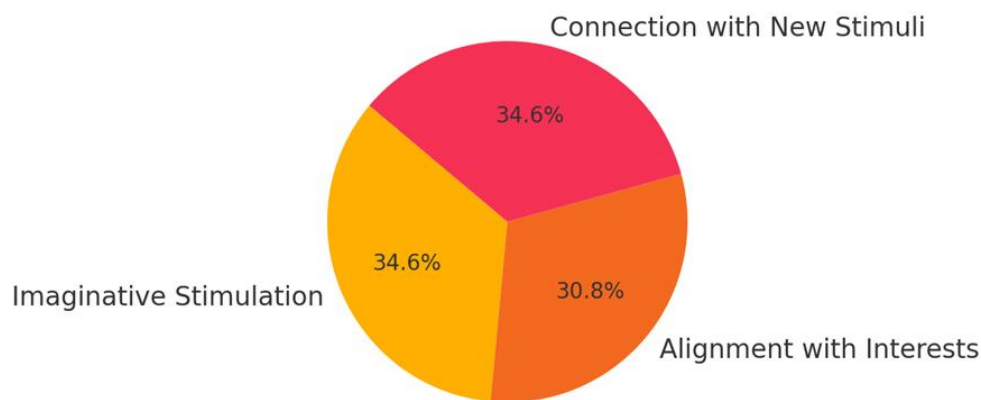


Figure 16: Creativity and Imagination Indicators in Preschool Activity

The activity demonstrated a strong influence on children's creativity and imagination, as evidenced by spontaneous verbal expressions, interpretative gestures, and imaginative responses. Sixteen out of eighteen children showed high levels of personal investment, suggesting that the session successfully aligned with their interests and encouraged meaningful participation. Moreover, the introduction of new cultural stimuli—such as unfamiliar musical styles or movement patterns—played a key role in sustaining their attention and stimulating curiosity. These elements not only supported creative engagement but also fostered openness to cultural difference, highlighting the pedagogical value of integrating imaginative and culturally rich content into early childhood education.

- **Temporal and Spatial Perception**

The temporal and spatial dimensions of flow were clearly evident in the observed activity, particularly through the children's altered perception of time and space. Fifteen out of eighteen participants appeared to enter a state of deep immersion, losing awareness of the passing of time and their physical surroundings—an essential hallmark of flow experiences, as theorised by Csikszentmihalyi (1990). This detachment from external temporal and spatial cues reflects the intensity of engagement and absorption elicited by the musical activity. Such altered perception suggests that the activity successfully transported the children into an imaginative and affective space, enabling

them to focus entirely on the musical process. This phenomenon is particularly valuable in early childhood education, where experiences that promote deep concentration and emotional resonance can support both cognitive development and emotional regulation. The presence of this flow indicator also highlights the potential of culturally enriched musical activities to transcend ordinary classroom routines, offering children a form of aesthetic escape that nurtures curiosity and inner calm. From a pedagogical perspective, the creation of such immersive conditions implies a well-calibrated balance between structure and freedom. When musical experiences are designed to engage the whole child—sensorially, emotionally, and intellectually—they can foster heightened states of learning and personal transformation. Thus, the data suggest that traditional and intercultural music activities hold significant potential for enhancing attentional focus, mental flexibility, and imaginative exploration in the preschool context.

- **Play Elements**

Findings illustrate the prevalence of play elements observed during the preschool musical activity. Notably, 14 out of 18 children (77.8%) demonstrated voluntary gestures, indicating self-initiated physical movement and a sense of agency. Similarly, 15 children (83.3%) displayed productive energy flow, channelling their engagement into the task with enthusiasm and creativity. The strong presence of these indicators highlights the significance of playfulness in fostering motivation, autonomy, and embodied participation—key components for achieving flow states in early childhood education.

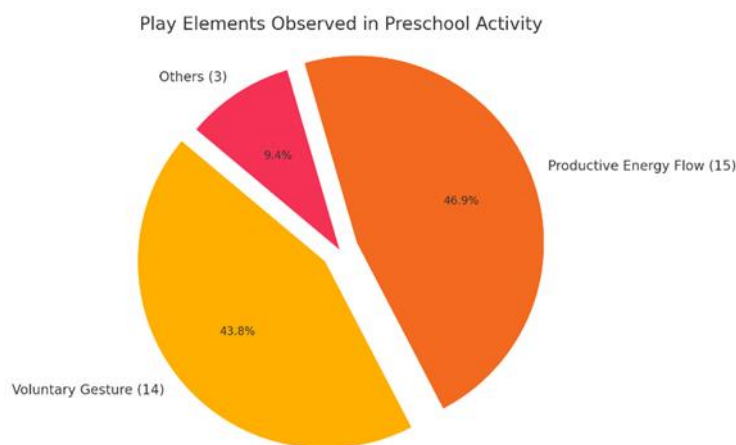


Figure 17: Play Elements Observed in Preschool Activity

The presence of play elements within the activity significantly enhanced the children’s engagement, motivation, and emotional investment. The playful nature of the session created a relaxed yet focused learning atmosphere, encouraging intrinsic enjoyment and participation. Fourteen out of eighteen children exhibited voluntary gestures, indicating a high level of agency and self-initiated involvement. These spontaneous physical responses reflected a strong sense of autonomy and a willingness to interact with the musical stimuli without external prompting. Furthermore, fifteen

children displayed productive energy flow, channelling their enthusiasm into coordinated, purposeful action. This effective use of physical and cognitive resources suggests that the activity supported both motor development and expressive creativity. The integration of play into the musical experience not only made the session more enjoyable but also fostered key developmental outcomes, such as self-regulation, imaginative engagement, and collaboration. These findings affirm the importance of embedding play-based approaches within early childhood music education, particularly in intercultural contexts. Playfulness acts as a bridge between learning and enjoyment, making it more likely for children to reach and sustain a state of flow. Ultimately, these results demonstrate that musical activities designed with playful structure and open-ended participation can offer rich opportunities for holistic learning and creative exploration in preschool settings.

- **Challenge and Difficulty**

The dimension of Challenge and Difficulty emerged as a crucial factor in maintaining children's engagement during the activity. The tasks were designed with a thoughtful gradation of difficulty, ensuring that they were stimulating enough to spark interest but not so complex as to cause frustration. This balance allowed children to operate within their zone of proximal development, which is essential for promoting growth while preserving motivation. Significantly, 15 out of the 18 participating children displayed a marked sense of competence and self-assurance while performing the musical tasks. Their confident responses suggest that the activity successfully matched their developing skills with suitable challenges, creating an optimal environment for sustained participation and learning. This outcome aligns with flow theory, which underscores the importance of balancing task complexity with individual abilities to foster intrinsic motivation. Moreover, the children's visible sense of achievement likely contributed to a positive learning disposition, encouraging further exploration and resilience. These findings reinforce the value of carefully differentiated instruction in early childhood music education, particularly when aiming to promote not only cognitive and artistic development, but also a sense of personal agency and accomplishment.

- **Expectation and Extension**

Findings illustrate the children's responses to the category of Expectation and Extension during the intercultural music activity based on French tradition. Sixteen out of eighteen children (88.9%) showed clear anticipation and forward-looking engagement, indicating strong cognitive and emotional investment. All children (100%) participated in the elaboration phase, where post-activity reflection enabled them to process and articulate their experience—an essential element for consolidating learning and sustaining flow. No extension or adaptation of the material occurred during the session, suggesting a fixed content structure, yet this did not hinder engagement. These findings

reinforce the pedagogical importance of integrating reflective questioning and sustained discussion into early childhood music sessions to maximise developmental outcomes.

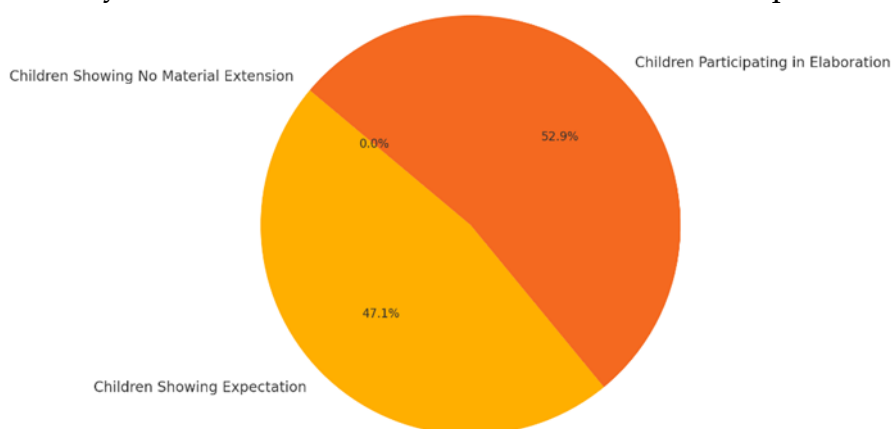


Figure 18: Expectation and Extension Indicators

The domain of Expectation and Extension proved particularly insightful in understanding children's anticipatory engagement and post-activity reflection. Sixteen out of eighteen children demonstrated clear signs of forward-looking anticipation, expressing excitement and curiosity about the unfolding musical activity. Although no formal extension or adaptation of the material occurred during the session itself, a meaningful level of elaboration was achieved through post-activity dialogue and reflective questioning. This continuation supported deeper cognitive and emotional processing, reinforcing the musical and cultural experiences that took place. Despite some signs of fatigue following earlier activities, the session—based on a French traditional musical custom—elicited strong emotional involvement, imaginative responses, and sustained participation. Flow-related characteristics such as concentration, satisfaction, and self-directed interaction were consistently observed across the group. Notably, the children's enthusiastic engagement with unfamiliar cultural content highlights the educational potential of intercultural music in early childhood. These findings suggest that musical activities which combine anticipation, reflective closure, and cultural novelty can enhance experiential learning and promote cultural awareness. By integrating structured challenge with opportunities for expression and reflection, intercultural music sessions create fertile ground for holistic development, enabling children to connect emotionally and cognitively with diverse traditions while strengthening their sense of curiosity and personal involvement.

3.5 Comparative Analysis of Flow Activities: Greek and French Traditional Music in Preschool Settings

The implementation of both musical activities—based on traditional Greek and French customs—demonstrated significant potential in fostering flow experiences among preschool children. While both sessions were successful in engaging participants across multiple qualitative domains, several notable differences emerged that offer meaningful insights for intercultural music education.

- **General Engagement and Flow Indicators:** In both activities, children showed high levels of emotional engagement, with 15/18 and 16/18 respectively reporting satisfaction during the Greek and French music activities. Indicators such as "emotional well-being" and "sense of pleasure" remained consistently strong across both sessions, affirming music's capacity to elicit positive affective responses. However, a minor decrease in performance levels was noted during the French activity, attributed primarily to the timing of the session (later in the day) and cumulative fatigue from prior participation.
- **Cognitive and Social Development:** Both activities reinforced the development of social and communicative skills. In the Greek music activity, 17 out of 18 children demonstrated enhanced social interaction and collaboration, a result mirrored during the French session. These findings support the proposition that traditional and intercultural music serve as effective pedagogical tools for strengthening early childhood cognitive and social-emotional domains.
- **Flow Conditions and Concentration:** Notably, the criteria of "full concentration," "awareness of demands," and "merging of action and consciousness" were met by a slightly higher percentage of children in the Greek activity (15–17/18) compared to the French session (14–16/18). This could be attributed to the cultural familiarity of the Greek material, which may have facilitated more intuitive engagement. The French activity, while novel and stimulating, introduced an unfamiliar cultural context, which may have required additional cognitive processing.
- **Creative Engagement and Cultural Stimuli:** Both sessions activated the children's imagination, especially through music-related movement and play. The French dance activity appeared to evoke slightly more curiosity in terms of "connection with new stimuli" and "alignment with interests," suggesting that intercultural exposure can invigorate children's creativity and cultural curiosity.
- **Temporal-Spatial Experience and Playfulness:** A defining characteristic of the flow state is the distortion of time and space perception. In both activities, 15 out of 18 children experienced such transformation. Furthermore, the presence of voluntary gestures and productive energy channeling confirmed the playful, immersive nature of both activities.

This comparative analysis underscores the value of integrating both culturally familiar and intercultural musical traditions into early childhood education. While traditional music reinforces identity and comfort, intercultural music introduces novelty, extending children's cultural awareness and cognitive adaptability. The inclusion of diverse musical experiences supports holistic child development by promoting creativity, emotional regulation, and social cohesion. Future practice should therefore consider blending local and global music in pedagogical frameworks to optimise early learning outcomes and promote intercultural understanding.

4. Discussion and Interpretation of Findings

This study offers robust empirical evidence underscoring the pedagogical value of traditional and intercultural music experiences in early childhood education, especially when framed within Csikszentmihalyi's Flow Theory (1990), intercultural pedagogy, and the principles of musical universality. Drawing upon qualitative and observational data from two structured music sessions—one rooted in Greek folk tradition and the other in a French children's dance—the research reveals how musical engagement, when both culturally grounded and developmentally appropriate, fosters optimal learning states, emotional resonance, and the formation of intercultural awareness in preschool-aged children.

A primary outcome of the study was the prevalence of flow indicators across both activities. Children consistently demonstrated traits such as deep concentration, self-motivation, task immersion, and altered perceptions of time and space—all defining features of flow states (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). These behaviours were particularly evident in moments of spontaneous movement, imaginative elaboration, and self-initiated participation. These findings reaffirm Custodero's (2005) application of flow theory to early childhood music education, which posits that young learners, when provided with meaningful and structured musical stimuli, exhibit profound cognitive and affective engagement.

By calibrating the complexity of musical tasks to the children's developmental stage, the activities successfully struck a balance between challenge and skill—what Csikszentmihalyi calls the “sweet spot” for flow. The Greek song allowed children to draw from cultural familiarity, supporting confidence and expressive ease, while the French activity introduced novelty that stimulated curiosity and encouraged risk-taking. Together, these experiences demonstrate that both cultural affirmation and intercultural exposure can generate flow conditions, especially when scaffolded through developmentally sensitive pedagogical design.

Beyond the psychological mechanics of flow, the findings substantiate the view of music as a cultural and ethical practice. Drawing from the tenets of World Music Pedagogy (Campbell, 2004; Schippers, 2010), the study positions music as a medium for intercultural dialogue, identity formation, and inclusive education. Music enabled children to engage meaningfully with both the familiar and the unfamiliar, suggesting that cultural diversity in musical content can serve not only as a cognitive challenge but as a relational and identity-building encounter. The Greek musical activity, with its familiar melodic contours and movement patterns, supported emotional security and cultural self-recognition. In contrast, the French activity acted as a catalyst for cultural expansion, providing space for creative interpretation and openness to difference.

The integration of traditional music into preschool activities is thus not merely a celebration of heritage but a dynamic practice of cultural negotiation and ethical engagement. These observations echo Westerlund's (2008) argument that music education should aim not just to transmit musical knowledge, but to cultivate empathic

understanding and ethical listening. Within this framework, music becomes a transformative pedagogical tool—capable of bridging cultural divides, validating identity, and promoting mutual respect.

One of the most salient findings relates to the emotional and psychological dimensions of musical engagement. A significant proportion of children across both activities exhibited joy, satisfaction, and sustained interest—indicators that align with emotionally responsive pedagogies (Whitebread *et al.*, 2012). Emotional well-being was not only expressed through facial affect and verbal affirmations but was also reflected in the children's willingness to take risks, to engage in group coordination, and to reflect critically on their experiences during post-activity discussions.

These outcomes lend empirical support to the theoretical proposition that musical engagement, particularly when designed with aesthetic and cultural intentionality, supports emotional resilience and social confidence in early childhood. The presence of play elements—such as voluntary gesture and imaginative improvisation—further supports the compatibility between musical engagement and developmental play theory. This reflects the position of Barrett (2006), who argues that music-making is a powerful form of symbolic and imaginative expression in early years education.

The creative and embodied dimensions of the observed flow experiences—spontaneous movement, vocal exploration, imaginative association—illustrate how aesthetic learning unfolds in multisensory, emotional, and interactive ways. As children enacted the rhythms and melodies of culturally distinct musical forms, they internalised not just sonic patterns but expressive and social meanings embedded in these traditions. In doing so, they activated a form of musical knowing that is experiential, affective, and culturally situated.

The study's findings reinforce the argument that intercultural education should begin in the early years and that music is a particularly effective vehicle for achieving its aims. As Banks (2009) and Nieto (2010) contend, early exposure to culturally diverse narratives fosters empathy, challenges stereotypes, and supports the development of critical cultural consciousness. In this study, children were invited to step into the expressive worlds of others—through movement, rhythm, and song—and to reflect on their experiences in a supportive, dialogic environment. This approach transforms the music classroom into a microcosm of democratic participation and ethical engagement.

The role of the teacher is especially vital in facilitating this transformation. Observational data suggest that the structure of the activities—the clarity of goals, the gradation of difficulty, the inclusion of reflection—was instrumental in fostering flow and meaningful learning. As Anderson and Campbell (2010) assert, intercultural music pedagogy must be rooted in authenticity, contextual understanding, and pedagogical sensitivity. The teachers in this study not only guided musical tasks but served as cultural mediators, inviting children into shared meaning-making processes and encouraging reflective thinking.

Furthermore, the inclusion of post-activity dialogue provided an essential space for elaboration, metacognition, and emotional processing. Children were encouraged to

articulate their thoughts, challenges, and aesthetic preferences—thus reinforcing the reflective and democratic ethos of intercultural education. This aspect of the design aligns with Freirean pedagogy (Freire, 1970), which values learners' voices and promotes the co-construction of knowledge through dialogic engagement.

A thematic analysis of flow indicators across the sessions revealed four interrelated dimensions: cognitive/learning (40.7%), emotional/motivational (37.0%), sensorimotor (11.1%), and interpersonal/social (11.1%). This distribution suggests that flow in early childhood music education is a multidimensional experience, integrating intellectual focus, emotional depth, physical expression, and social interaction. These results are congruent with Hallam's (2010) conception of music learning as a holistic activity that encompasses cognitive, affective, and psychomotor domains.

Notably, the high presence of cognitive and emotional indicators demonstrates that musical experiences can stimulate both intellectual engagement and emotional resonance—reinforcing the argument that music should be considered a core rather than supplementary component of early childhood education. The relatively lower—but still significant—presence of sensorimotor and interpersonal indicators points to the need for further research on the embodied and collaborative aspects of early musical flow.

The presence of flow-related behaviours such as self-assignment, action-consciousness merging, and reflective elaboration affirms the theory that young children, when immersed in meaningful musical experiences, actively co-create learning contexts rather than passively receiving content. These behaviours also signal the development of metacognitive awareness and social-emotional competencies, skills increasingly recognised as essential for 21st-century education (OECD, 2019).

Another important insight from the study lies in the interplay between cultural familiarity and novelty. The Greek traditional music session was associated with higher levels of emotional security and confident participation—likely due to children's pre-existing cultural exposure. In contrast, the French musical activity required children to navigate unfamiliar sonic and kinesthetic elements, prompting exploratory behaviours and adaptive strategies.

Both types of engagement are pedagogically valuable. Cultural familiarity supports identity formation and emotional grounding, while novelty encourages curiosity, flexibility, and intercultural openness. As Schippers (2010) notes, intercultural music education must balance representation with challenge, offering children both the comfort of recognition and the stimulation of difference. In the context of this study, the dual structure of the musical sessions allowed children to oscillate between these two modes, fostering both cultural affirmation and imaginative expansion.

The cumulative evidence from this research highlights the urgent need to embed traditional and intercultural music within early childhood curricula in a systematic and intentional manner. Music should not be relegated to an ancillary role but should be integrated into the core fabric of preschool education—serving as a bridge between cognitive, emotional, social, and cultural domains. Policymakers and curriculum designers are encouraged to adopt frameworks that support intercultural musical

engagement, flow-based pedagogy, and teacher professional development in cultural competence and musical facilitation.

Teacher training programmes, in particular, must include modules on flow theory, intercultural education, and world music pedagogy. Educators should be equipped not only with musical knowledge but with the reflective and relational capacities to create inclusive, responsive, and joyful learning environments. Resources must also be allocated to support the use of authentic cultural materials and to foster partnerships with musicians and culture bearers.

4.1 Policy and Practice Recommendations

To support the integration of intercultural music education in early years settings, several key strategies should be considered. National early childhood curricula should embed music from both local and global traditions as a core dimension of intercultural education. Educator training programmes must include dedicated modules on flow theory, cultural pedagogy, and intercultural music education to prepare teachers for culturally diverse classroom environments. Schools should invest in culturally authentic musical materials and collaborate with artists from various backgrounds to enhance the relevance and richness of musical content. Finally, inclusive pedagogies that balance challenge and support through differentiated activities are essential for meeting the diverse needs and abilities of young learners.

4.2 Research Implications and Emerging Questions

The findings of this study generate several important directions for future research. Central among them is the question of how the integration of traditional and intercultural music influences preschool children's aesthetic perception and cultural awareness. Furthermore, this study invites deeper exploration into how flow experiences can be intentionally designed and scaffolded within early childhood music education. The role of cultural familiarity versus novelty in shaping emotional and cognitive engagement also warrants further investigation. Finally, more systematic research is needed to understand how intercultural music pedagogies can be embedded into educational practice to foster equity, creativity, and inclusion in diverse learning environments.

5. Conclusions

In conclusion, this study affirms the transformative power of music in early childhood education—especially when grounded in cultural context and pedagogically structured to elicit flow. Through carefully designed traditional and intercultural music activities, preschool children demonstrated not only aesthetic appreciation and emotional satisfaction but also cultural empathy, creative expression, and collaborative learning. These findings suggest that music is uniquely positioned to support holistic development in the early years and that its integration into intercultural education is both an ethical imperative and a pedagogical opportunity. As educational systems seek to cultivate

inclusive, creative, and culturally literate citizens, music emerges as a compelling and effective pathway—one that honours children’s voices, nurtures their identities, and prepares them to engage meaningfully with a diverse and interconnected world.

This study has demonstrated the multifaceted potential of traditional and intercultural music to act as a catalyst for aesthetic, emotional, and cognitive development in early childhood education. Through the integration of carefully designed musical activities rooted in both Greek and French cultural traditions, the research revealed how young children engage deeply with music in ways that nurture their cultural awareness, social connectedness, and personal expression.

The presence of flow indicators across both sessions—concentration, enjoyment, challenge-skill balance, and imaginative participation—underscored the effectiveness of intercultural music education as a framework for inclusive, meaningful learning. Music emerged not merely as an art form but as a pedagogical tool for fostering empathy, autonomy, and reflective thinking. The children’s responses validated the theoretical propositions of Flow Theory (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), World Music Pedagogy (Campbell, 2004), and intercultural education (Banks, 2009), highlighting the intersection of musical engagement and cultural identity formation.

Furthermore, the study emphasises the importance of aligning music education practices with children’s developmental needs, interests, and lived cultural experiences. The findings support the integration of traditional and intercultural music into early years curricula as a powerful strategy for cultivating a sense of belonging, aesthetic sensitivity, and respect for difference. In this way, intercultural music education contributes not only to artistic growth but to the shaping of socially conscious, culturally responsive learners. Future research may further explore longitudinal effects and expand on the pedagogical applications of intercultural music in diverse educational contexts.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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