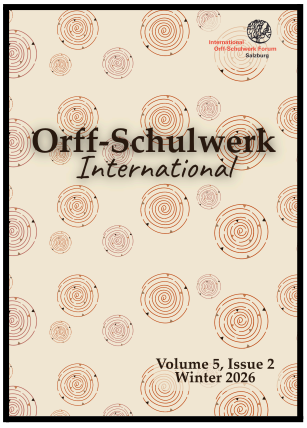
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Elemental Music and Dance Pedagogy in Primary Schools: A Critical Reflection on a Study Conducted 20 Years Ago

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Olympia Agalianou

The "Why" Behind This Article

This paper is an autoethnographic account that explores shifts in research methodology while reflectively addressing my experiences and academic identity. Specifically, this reflects on my doctoral study from twenty years ago, on the elemental dance and music pedagogy in Greek Primary Schools. One might wonder: why should we revisit this past study? Why dedicate time to discuss research from two decades ago in a world that feels completely different, especially considering that technology has transformed our reality?

I chose this research as a starting point for an epistemological discussion that may deepen our understanding of the present. It was the first study to investigate an Orff-Schulwerk-based education intervention in the field, and it was conducted during a period of intense methodological debate within the field of educational research. It represents one of the earliest educational research projects to adopt a qualitative approach examining educational interventions conducted in Greece. At that time, positivism was the dominant epistemological paradigm. Since then, qualitative research methodology has progressed significantly. I believe that a critical and reflective review of my past methodological choices— through the lens of my current role as a researcher and mentor — can foster a meaningful dialogue regarding how these choices could be adopted in today's research landscape.

Initial Literature Review Insights

As with any research endeavour, I began my doctoral study by conducting a literature review, attempting to identify studies examining interventions based on Orff-Schulwerk or similar approaches. In this endeavour, I discovered that existing research was limited, and I also identified two key issues. First, despite the widespread use of Orff-Schulwerk and other related approaches, there was a lack of empirical research data. Furthermore, existing studies were of limited value, raising questions about the validity of their experimental findings (Hedden& Woods, 1992; Bush, 2002). At that time, the prevailing research trend focused either on comparing educational methods or on the influence of intervention programs on specific skills. In both cases, researchers utilised experimental designs, employing intervention and control groups, conducting various pre- and post-intervention measurements, and analysing data using statistical methods. Regrettably, these types of studies suffer from two major conceptual flaws. Firstly, they completely marginalise the teacher, failing to recognise their critical role in the process. Secondly, they mistakenly classify dynamic approaches such as Orff-Schulwerk as inflexible methodologies, overlooking their inherent flexibility and adaptability. Such studies failed to recognise a foundational pedagogical truth that who teaches matters far more than what is taught (Hattie, 2009), especially within Orff-Schulwerk, where the educator’s active pedagogical stance is central to the method’s fluid philosophy (AOSA, n.d).

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However, during that period, the concept of the "teacher's personal theory" began to gain ground and bring teachers' perceptions to the forefront of research, underlining the importance of their unique perspectives in educational discourse (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988) and highlighting the importance of their personal ideas and knowledge-in-action (Schön, 1983). A teacher's personal theory refers to the structured system of implicit or explicit beliefs, values, and experiential knowledge that educators develop over time, and which actively shapes their classroom decisions, instructional practices, and pedagogical identity (Chant, Heafner & Bennet, 2004). In line with this shift, Carter (1990) critically argued against the traditional view of teachers as mere implementers of curriculum, emphasising instead the complexity of the practical knowledge they actively construct.

Ultimately, these types of ideas paved the way for a broader epistemological shift that was taking place in educational research, as qualitative methods began to challenge the traditional dominance of positivism. The debate between qualitative and quantitative paradigms was in full swing, and for the first time, the positivist status quo was being seriously questioned.

Personal Motivation and Significance of the Study

My doctoral research focused on Movement and Music Education, a thematic unit that was introduced into the school physical education curriculum in 1995 and has been influenced by Orff-Schulwerk philosophy. Concurrently, there was a significant change in Greek physical education, as primary schools across the country began to be staffed by university-trained physical education (PE) teachers. In 2003, a new curriculum further consolidated this thematic unit. In parallel, the National Pedagogical Institute initiated the publication of official textbooks and teacher manuals to provide the necessary theoretical framework and pedagogical materials. Additionally, student books were issued for the first time, though their pedagogical purpose and application remained unclear. Although the development of these books commenced in 2003, they were eventually distributed in 2007. Having been selected through a national competition to author and oversee this specific unit in the new books, I had the opportunity to integrate the Orff-Schulwerk philosophy deeply into the fabric.

However, this development raised a critical question when innovation met reality: were these PE teachers, who had started integrating into primary education just eight years prior, genuinely prepared to implement such an innovation? Furthermore, was the Greek primary school system as a whole ready to support this transition? Yet, this investigation was also catalysed by a broader spectrum of contextual challenges. In Greece, at that time, all schools operated under a centralised and rigid curriculum, raising the question of how a creative and expressive approach could successfully thrive and ‘breathe’ within such a framework. Additionally, there was a widespread perception that the school physical education curriculum was primarily dominated by sports, leaving Greek traditional dance as the sole exception. Ultimately, until that period, the university curricula in Physical Education and Sport Sciences departments offered limited training for teaching primary school children, particularly regarding expressive and creative approaches.

Given my interconnected roles as a primary school physical education specialist, a trained and active Orff practitioner, and the author of the official textbooks, investigating the lived

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experiences generated by this curriculum innovation emerged as an essential and imperative path.

Choosing Method

The choice of method is dictated by the research purpose, alongside the available data reported in the literature (Creswell & Creswell 2018, Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). My intention to explore the lived educational experience of implementing elemental dance and music pedagogy as a new thematic unit in Greek physical education—given the limited research on the topic—led me to search for an appropriate methodology. It was clear that this kind of investigation could not be carried out using an experimental design from the positivist, quantitative tradition—even if, at the time, that dominant methodology felt almost mandatory.

Today, we can finally acknowledge that standard quantitative measurements fail to capture the complexity of teaching an artistic and creative subject, as well as the raw friction of teachers' navigation. Back then, I had to struggle through deep epistemological debates with my supervisors to justify choosing an ethnographic case study as the method of my doctoral research. According to my own reflection, an ethnographic case study was the only method that could capture living complexity and allow me to investigate the actual lived experiences of students and teachers facing the innovation gap within physical education, given the lack of adequate teacher training, the introduction of new textbooks, and the limited existing research (Merriam,1998; Hammersley, 1990).

I embarked on this investigation, while serving in primary education as a PE teacher, holding various roles at the time: as the textbook author, research designer, and participant observer. At the time, this intersection was viewed as a potential research conflict. From today's perspective, we recognise this not as a conflict, but as a core element of the researcher's positionality. Today, declaring the researcher's positionality is widely considered essential, and a rich, nuanced positionality is recognised as a powerful asset that enhances the credibility and depth of the research (Berger, 2015; Holmes, 2020).

The Research Process

After the study and its research design in 2004, the fieldwork was conducted during the 2005–2006 academic year. It involved two public primary schools selected through convenience sampling, along with their PE teachers and 85 third- and fourth-grade students. The purpose of the fieldwork was to investigate students' and teachers' experiences, identify facilitating and hindering factors, and evaluate the achievement of PE goals. Data collection tools included participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and the written reports of the PE teachers.

Spanning an entire academic year, the research encompassed observation and evaluation of the two settings before the intervention, the intervention itself—which followed the exact duration specified by the curriculum—and post-intervention observation. Critically, the evaluation focused not only on the participating teachers and children, but also on the broader educational context as a whole. The pre-intervention phase lasted two months and comprised context observation along with interviews with both the PE teachers and other school educators. The intervention phase likewise lasted two months. The fieldwork

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concluded with a two-month post-intervention phase, which sought to explore the transferability of the intervention to the broader school context. I intended to work collaboratively with the two PE teachers as a scientific and research team, co-creating content while actively listening to their insights and reflections. My goal was to bridge the gap between educational policy design, curricula, and textbooks, and the actual reality of the school environment.

One of the most important phases of any research process, perhaps even the most important one, is data analysis. Since I was conducting an ethnographic case study, I followed an inductive analysis approach, wrestling with amounts of raw data from hours of observations and interviews (LeCompte et al., 1993). Through constant comparison and coding, I allowed the categories to emerge organically to answer my research questions (Burns,2000). Yet, was it a true inductive analysis by today's standards? The next section of the text examines this issue, alongside a reflective overview of the methodology through the lens of my current role.

Prior to proceeding, I will provide only a brief overview of the findings, given that they belong to a different time and context. Nevertheless, this research was among the first in Greece to demonstrate the significance of the wider educational environment for research results. Specifically, it identified the factors that either facilitate or hinder this thematic unit. It also categorised future recommendations from both teachers and students—a true research innovation for its time—while mapping out the key issues that required further investigation. At the time, the results had the potential to be leveraged for both educational policymaking and planning as well as for practical applications in the field.

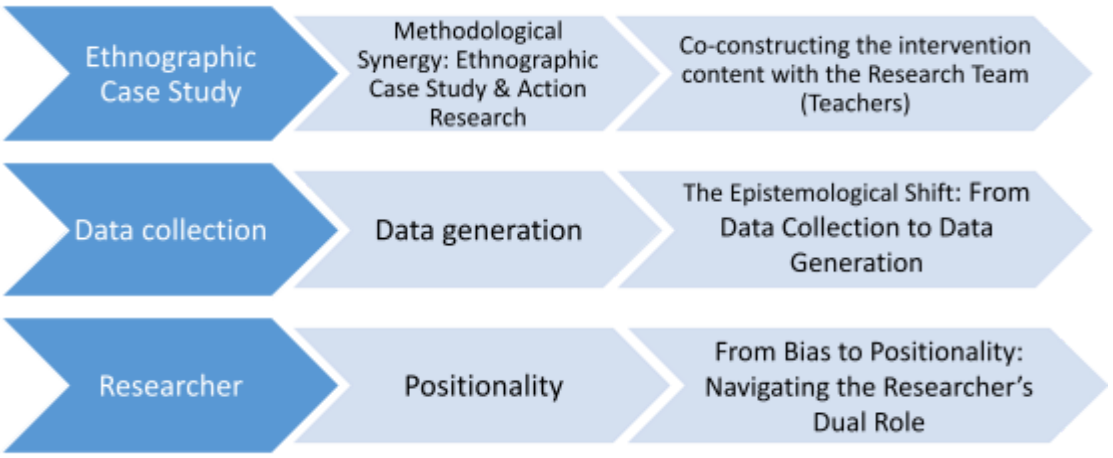
Revisiting the Research Process: A Critical Reflection

A critical review of the original methodology prompts a fundamental question regarding how such a study would be designed within the contemporary research landscape. Furthermore, reflecting through the lens of my current role as a mentor, it invites a consideration of the guidance I would offer postgraduate students embarking on a similar academic challenge. First and foremost, this entails ensuring that their research questions are deeply contextualised within contemporary educational and societal needs. Through a reflective lens and guided by the knowledge and experience gained over the intervening years, I will attempt to revise my methodology, conceptualising how this study would be conducted today.

Building on the growth, the openness and the acceptance of qualitative methodology in academia, I propose a research design that combines an ethnographic case study with action research (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000). Specifically, I would emphasise the co-design of the intervention's content alongside the teachers, prompting them to function more effectively as a unified research team, while the researcher assumes the role of a critical friend (Costa & Kallick, 1993). Ideally, I would also welcome the involvement of one or two additional critical friends. Furthermore, I would strongly urge them to precisely define researcher positionality. Such transparency is strictly required in contemporary scholarship (Holmes, 2020). Indeed, had the methodology offered me this opportunity at the time, I would have bypassed numerous challenges and critiques.

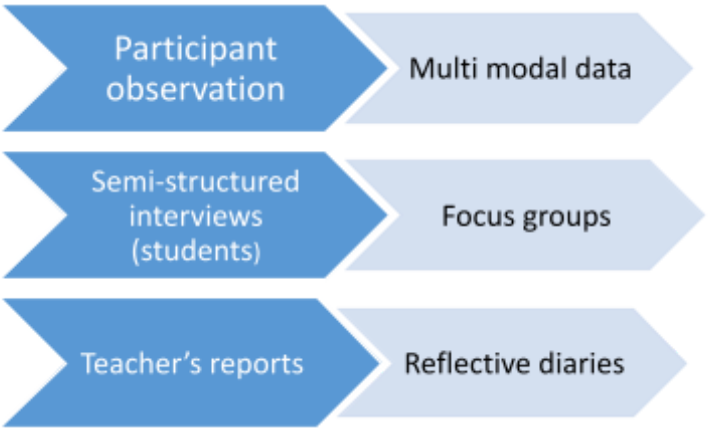
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Figure 1. Methodological shifts



Moving forward, I would explain to new researchers and to the teachers why contemporary qualitative methodology refers to data generation rather than data collection, and equip them with the skills to generate rich, high-quality qualitative data. I would also enrich the participant observation data using multimodal data and analysis (Jewitt, 2014; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001). This would primarily include children's in-class musical and dance compositions and photographs taken by both students and teachers. Additionally, I would replace semi-structured student interviews with focus groups to leverage group dynamics in uncovering collective meanings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I would replicate this interview approach with the school staff during the post-intervention phase. Furthermore, instead of standard teacher reports, I would introduce reflective diaries for deeper insights into daily practices (Miles et al., 2014).

Figure 2. Shifts in Data Collection and Production

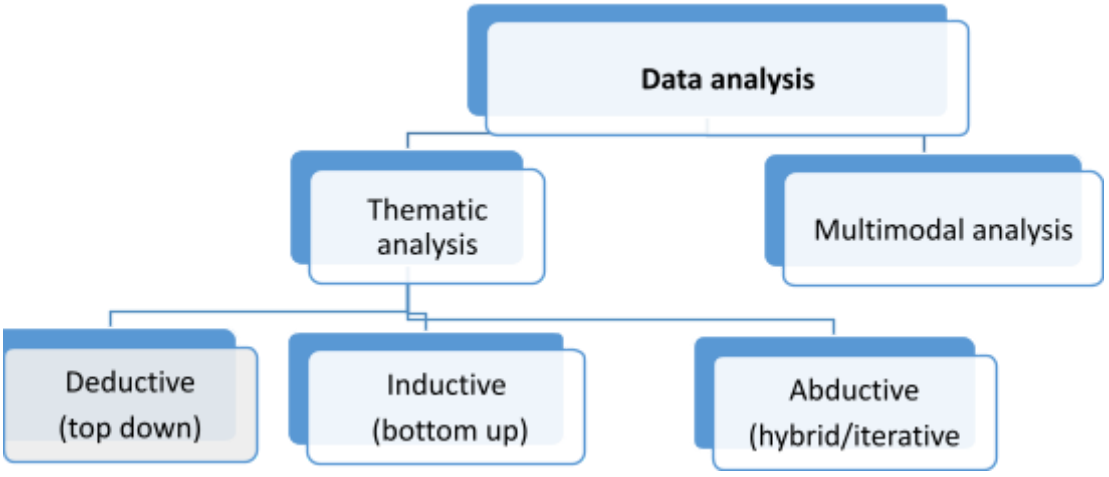


At this juncture, the focus shifts to thematic analysis, a core qualitative method continually debated epistemologically. This research phase is always an iterative struggle between the researcher and the complexity of the raw data (Polat, 2025). Initially, I equated thematic analysis with an inductive approach, assuming it was the sole method.

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Today I recognise that thematic analysis hinges on three logical reasoning methods: deductive, inductive, and abductive. These methods determine whether a top-down or bottom-up approach is utilised to navigate between data, research questions, and theory (Reichertz, 2014). Reflecting on my earlier work, I realise that my approach was deductive rather than inductive. However, there was an element of abductive reasoning, even though I was unaware of its existence and significance. This methodological choice was quite unconventional for that time.

Figure 3. Thematic analysis methods



Today, Braun and Clarke's six-stage framework offers me and other researchers valuable guidance and emphasises reflexive practices (Braun & Clarke, 2022, 2006). We also have at our disposal specialised Computer-Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS), such as NVivo or ATLAS.ti, for raw data management. However, in my view, technological tools cannot replace a researcher's critical understanding of a study's unique context.

Coda

Inspired by W. Edwards Deming (1986), I believe framing the right question is the most crucial part of research. In education, although core questions have fundamentally remained unchanged, our responses must be continuously updated to reflect a rapidly evolving world. Ultimately, the choice of method should depend solely on the research question, not on the researcher's proficiency to implement it or perceived scientific validity, as was often the case with the positivist paradigm. To clarify, I deeply appreciate the significant contributions of quantitative research and statistical analysis.

Researchers should be adept in various methodologies to choose the best fit for their inquiries. A strong research design requires familiarity with both qualitative and quantitative conceptual paradigms, highlighting the value of research collaborations when individual scholars cannot perform both analyses independently.

In this case too, the research process and potential collaborations depend entirely on the research question.

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I would like to conclude with my personal reflection. While celebrating the advancement and widespread adoption of qualitative methodologies, I share a growing concern within the academic community. Specifically, as qualitative approaches proliferate, I recognise a lurking risk of delusion and loss of methodological rigour. Additionally, it is essential to shift away from research driven by trivial inquiries, as they inevitably result in formulaic conclusions where researcher bias is evident. My aspiration is to foster a deeper, more meaningful convergence between theory and practice. I advocate for research that offers transferable, actionable insights and tangible support for practitioners. To be clear, the goal is not to enforce rigid content or dogmatic beliefs, but to empower practitioners to critically develop their own professional mindsets, create a flexible personal theory, and enhance their educational and instructional methods.

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An active researcher and author, she has published a monograph, chapters in 12 collective editions, and numerous articles in scientific journals and conference proceedings. Her professional experience spans decades, including roles as a primary school PE teacher, an Orff-Schulwerk educator, and a performing artist. She has also lectured at the European University Cyprus.

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