

The Kodály Method in Chinese University Early Childhood Education: A Systematic Review

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Abstract: *This study conducts a systematic literature review to examine the application and research trends of the Kodály Method in early childhood music education in China from 2014 to 2024. Following inclusion criteria including practice oriented, peer reviewed, and published within the past decade, relevant Chinese studies were analyzed to explore teaching effectiveness, research focuses, and future directions. Findings indicate that the Kodály Method, with its core elements of tonic sol-fa, hand signs, and rhythm training, significantly enhances students' rhythm perception, pitch accuracy, and musical expression while fostering interest in learning and cultural identity. However, challenges remain, including the insufficient localization of teaching content, the uneven distribution of educational resources between urban and rural areas, and the lack of long-term systematic intervention studies. Moreover, current practices often overemphasize symbolic learning, neglecting the method's emphasis on sequential teaching and experiential activities like singing, movement, and music games, which are key to developing musical perception. This study calls for more empirical research, a stronger focus on sequential teaching design, enhanced music practice experiences, and deeper integration of localized content to support the sustainable implementation of the Kodály Method in China's early childhood education.*

Keywords: Kodály Method, Early Childhood Education, Music Education

1. Introduction

The Kodály Method, as one of the world's three major music education approaches, emphasizes the use of tonic sol-fa, hand signs, and rhythm training, combined with localized folk music practices, to enhance students' musical literacy, learning interest, and cultural identity. With the advancement of China's early childhood education reforms, the importance of music education in fostering students' holistic development has become increasingly prominent. However, the application and research of the Kodály Method in China's early childhood education programs remain in an exploratory phase, with existing studies often fragmented and lacking systematic review and analysis.

This study focuses on the current application and research trends of the Kodály Method in China's early childhood education programs. It aims to summarize its teaching effectiveness, research hotspots, and existing challenges, while proposing future directions for development. Using a systematic literature review approach, this research analyzes studies published between

2014 and 2024, concentrating on three key areas: the practical advantages of the Kodály Method in developing musical skills, fostering cultural identity, and driving educational innovation; the challenges of localizing the teaching content and methods; and the role of modern educational technologies in supporting and optimizing its implementation.

The article begins by outlining the core concepts and research design, including literature selection criteria, search methods, and analysis frameworks. It then reviews representative studies, summarizing the key characteristics and challenges of applying the Kodály Method in China's early childhood education programs. Finally, through a comprehensive analysis, this study proposes pathways for future development and recommendations for improvement, offering theoretical support and practical guidance for advancing music education diversity and localization in China.

2. Definition and Research Design

Kodály Method

The Kodály Method, developed by Hungarian music educator Zoltán Kodály, is a music education system centered on the philosophy that “music belongs to everyone.” It integrates tonic sol-fa, hand signs, and rhythm training, emphasizing the development of musical literacy through singing, auditory training, and rhythm exercises. The method also highlights the importance of folk music in enhancing cultural identity and inspiring musical interest. Since its introduction to China in the 1980s, the Kodály Method has demonstrated significant advantages in early childhood education. However, its implementation in vocational early childhood education programs remains in the early stages, facing challenges such as weak musical foundations and one-dimensional teaching approaches. The effective integration and localization of the Kodály Method to meet the needs of early childhood education students have become pressing issues.

Music Education in Early Childhood

Early childhood is a critical stage for learning and development, where music education plays a significant role. Children aged 3 to 6 are in a sensitive period for perceptual and cognitive development, showing a strong interest in rhythm, melody, and musical activities. Proper music education not only improves pitch and rhythm perception but also cultivates attention, expressive ability, and creativity. In recent years, advancements in early childhood music education have been supported by policies and teaching reforms. For example, integrating folk music into classrooms through storytelling and role-playing enhances cultural identity and participation. However, challenges such as insufficient teaching resources, a lack of qualified teachers, and uneven resource distribution remain prominent, particularly in rural areas. Developing localized music curricula that incorporate traditional Chinese culture and implementing game-based teaching strategies are critical to providing personalized and diversified music education experiences.

Present Study

This study employs a systematic literature review to explore the Kodály Method's application in China's early childhood education programs. Using Okoli's eight-step systematic review framework, a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods was applied to integrate high-quality literature and ensure the validity of the findings. Literature selection adhered to Loh's quality assessment criteria, evaluating reliability, objectivity, credibility, and transferability while eliminating biases related to sources, publication, and sample selection. The inclusion criteria focused on practice-oriented literature published within the past decade,

emphasizing real-world classroom applications. A total of 20 studies were selected, primarily from the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI), with supplementary references to English-language studies to broaden perspectives (Table 1).

The literature review was conducted in three phases: keyword searching, selection and analysis, and thematic summary. Initial searches using keywords such as “Kodály” and “early childhood” identified 432 publications, including journal articles, dissertations, and conference papers. After filtering for relevance and quality, 130 studies were shortlisted and further refined to 20 studies that met the inclusion criteria. The selected studies address key themes such as teaching implementation, student development in musical abilities, cultural adaptation, and teacher training strategies. These findings highlight the primary focus areas of current research and provide a foundation for understanding the Kodály Method’s diverse applications in China’s early childhood education programs. The methodologies adopted across the selected studies were categorized into qualitative and quantitative approaches, including classroom observations, case studies, surveys, and experimental research (Table 2).

Table 1: Classification of Journal Articles and Conference Papers

Journal Name	Number of Papers
Northern Music	3
International Journal of Music Education	1
Culture and Education: Cultura Education	1
Eurasian Journal of Educational Research	1
The Voice of the Yellow River	1
Journal of Jiamusi Vocational College	1
Shanxi Youth	1

Table 2: Classification of Sources for Academic Theses

University Name	Degree Level
Central China Normal University	Master
Harbin Normal University	Master
Hebei Normal University	Master
Sichuan Conservatory of Music	Master
Yunnan Arts University	Master
Xinjiang Normal University	Master
Shandong Normal University	Master
Shenyang Normal University	Master

Research Objectives

This study aims to explore the application and research trends of the Kodály Method in China’s early childhood education, with a focus on its localization and optimization. The specific research objectives are:

- 1) To analyze the main findings, teaching outcomes, and practical applications of the Kodály Method in China’s early childhood education programs.
- 2) To explore the core research themes, including rhythm perception, creativity, and the practical implications in music education.
- 3) To summarize the challenges, identify research gaps, and propose localized strategies and future research directions for optimizing the Kodály Method.

Research Questions

- 1) What are the main teaching outcomes and practical applications of the Kodály Method in early childhood education in China?
- 2) What are the core research themes, such as rhythm perception and creativity, and their practical implications?
- 3) What challenges exist in the current research, and what localized strategies and future research directions can improve the application of the Kodály Method?

Analytical Methods

This study employs a combination of inductive reasoning and comparative analysis to summarize and compare the core findings and research designs of the selected literature. For example, comparisons were made between studies focusing on the localization of the Kodály Method in different regions and the consistency of its teaching effects, particularly in rhythm and pitch training. The literature was further categorized into qualitative research, quantitative research, mixed-method studies, and musicological research. Findings reveal that most studies adopt qualitative methods, reflecting a strong emphasis on practical experience and classroom observations in early childhood music education. This result indicates that future research should incorporate more quantitative studies to expand the breadth and depth of existing literature.

The organization of literature sources further highlights the academic distribution and institutional influence of research on the Kodály Method in China's early childhood music education. Most authors come from Chinese cultural backgrounds, which may influence the diversity and scope of research perspectives. Future studies should involve researchers from diverse cultural backgrounds to enhance research diversity and incorporate cross-cultural considerations in teacher training and instructional strategy design. Such cross-cultural perspectives would not only support the localization of the Kodály Method but also contribute to its potential for international dissemination.

Overall, this systematic literature review comprehensively summarizes the application, research characteristics, and value of the Kodály Method in China's early childhood education. The study identifies existing gaps, such as the lack of long-term empirical research and insufficient depth in cultural adaptation, and suggests future directions, including multidisciplinary approaches and long-term tracking studies. These findings provide a systematic theoretical basis for educators to optimize instructional design and improve practical teaching abilities while offering actionable recommendations for advancing academic research.

3. Descriptive Content Overview

Before conducting a detailed analysis, each document was categorized and summarized to clarify its relevance to the research objectives. First, we identified the educational settings addressed in the literature, such as early childhood or kindergarten music education, and determined whether the research context focused on China's education system. Second, we analyzed whether the teaching content involved vocal music, instrumental music, folk music, or integrated music arts, and examined the teaching methods employed, such as creative practices, repertoire-based learning, or auditory analysis-focused approaches. Additionally, the study summarized each document's research questions, key findings, and identified gaps or future directions. Examples include the need for long-term tracking of teaching effects, the integration of technology with teaching methods, localized instructional cases, and explorations of personalized learning needs. This categorization and summary not only

facilitated a comparison of differences and commonalities across the literature but also provided systematic support for the subsequent theoretical framework and practical recommendations.

4. Analysis and Discussion

Findings 1: Research Fields and Application Contexts

In recent years, the Kodály Method has been widely applied and discussed in China’s early childhood music education, covering diverse educational contexts, including early childhood programs, undergraduate education, vocational education, and in-service teacher training. Existing studies primarily focus on vocal music courses, demonstrating that the Kodály Method’s emphasis on rhythm and pitch training significantly enhances students’ musical perception and performance skills. It is particularly effective in cultivating students’ interest in and understanding of music (Liu, 2022; Qiu, 2023). For instance, Song (2023) further demonstrated the role of music games in sight-singing and ear-training courses, enriching practical classroom applications of the Kodály Method.

Some studies have explored its role in music initiation programs, suggesting that music training activities effectively stimulate students’ interest in learning music (Liu, 2022). In the context of curriculum design, the Kodály Method not only enhances students’ instructional design abilities but also fosters creativity, enabling them to integrate content into teaching practices effectively (Ding, 2023; Kong, 2023). In vocational college vocal music teaching, the method has shown potential to improve students’ artistic expression and teaching practice skills (Yang, 2022). Research in vocational education has also demonstrated its effectiveness in resource-limited environments, where hands-on rhythm and pitch training significantly improved students’ musical abilities (He, 2018; Wang, 2023).

Meanwhile, the integration of the Kodály Method with localized music culture has gained research attention. For example, You (2018) and Zhang (2017) emphasized that combining the Kodály Method with Chinese folk music not only increases students’ musical interest and participation but also strengthens their cultural identity. Tang (2023) noted that, compared to other international music education approaches, the Kodály Method offers significant advantages in pitch and rhythm training.

Overall, while the Kodály Method has demonstrated broad applicability across various courses and educational contexts, current research remains largely focused on vocal music. Exploration of its application in other music disciplines remains insufficient (Table 3).

Table 3: Research Themes, Findings, and Gaps

Author	Location	Research Topic	Key Findings	Research Gaps
Qiu (2018)	Shandong	Application of Kodály Method in Preschool Teacher Vocal Music Training	The Kodály method, through singing training, rhythm exercises, and folk music material, improves musical literacy and teaching skills of preschool teachers.	Lack of practical cases, insufficient exploration of localized teaching methods.
Yang (2016)	Urumqi	Current State of Music Education in Preschool	Music education faces insufficient teacher resources, incomplete facilities, and limited teaching content, which affects teaching quality.	Insufficient research on integrating bilingual education with music teaching.

		Vocational Schools		
Deng (2018)	China	Application of “Three Major Music Teaching Methods” in Kindergarten Music Education	The Kodály method effectively develops children’s musical abilities, particularly in rhythm and auditory sensitivity. Music teaching centered on games aligns with developmental needs of 3-6-year-old children.	Limited systematic practical studies in kindergarten music courses. Insufficient research on the localization and integration of the teaching methods.
Wang (2023)	Shanxi	Current State and Reform Strategies of Preschool Music Education in Vocational Schools	Preschool music education suffers from weak foundational teaching, outdated methods, and insufficient musical literacy among students.	Lack of teacher training, limited research on long-term effects of reform strategies.
Chen (2023)	Nanjing	Reform of Preschool Education Music Curriculum	Music curriculum reforms improve children’s interest and engagement; course content is better aligned with children’s needs.	Insufficient cross-cultural research and diversified curriculum design.
Tang (2023)	China	Evaluation of Kodály, Orff, and Dalcroze Methods in National Music Education	Kodály and Orff methods excel in pitch, rhythm, and music interest but face difficulties in sight-singing. Limited data analysis reduces systematic conclusions.	Lack of long-term empirical studies on the Kodály method’s standardization and effectiveness.
Zhu (2022)	Changsha	Current Status and Innovation Research in Preschool Teacher Music Education	Curriculum content is outdated; teaching models are rigid, and comprehensive music literacy among students is insufficient. Solutions: diverse teaching approaches and improved teacher training.	Lack of innovative practices and research integrating modern music education needs.
Han (2016)	Shenyang	Localization of International Three Major Music Teaching Methods	Kodály focuses on emotional, creative, and musical literacy with Chinese cultural integration.2. Combines folk music to enrich teaching content and promote cultural heritage.	Weak integration of teaching methods with local practices; limited case studies supporting their use.
Song (2016)	Shandong	Research on the application of integrating sight-singing and ear-training teaching into music games	Music games can help improve students’ musical memory, auditory training and creativity, stimulate learning interest and enhance classroom interactivity.	music game scan helps improve students’ musical memory, auditory training and creativity, stimulate learning interest and enhance classroom interactivity.

Findings 2: Research Methods and Design

A total of eight studies met the inclusion criteria. While the Kodály Method has garnered extensive attention as a research theme, the number of studies meeting empirical research standards remains relatively limited. The current body of research demonstrates methodological diversity, primarily employing literature analysis, case studies, classroom observations, and survey research (Wang, 2023; Zhu, 2022). For instance, meta-analyses and systematic reviews reveal the significant impact of rhythm and pitch training on improving students’ musical skills (Tang, 2023). Classroom observations provide insight into the practical effects of the Kodály Method in early childhood vocal music teaching (Qiu, 2014). Case studies focus on specific teaching contexts, illustrating how music games and teaching experiments can stimulate students’ interest and enhance their instructional design abilities (Song, 2016; Qiu, 2014).

Furthermore, the research methods encompass qualitative, quantitative, mixed-method, and meta-analysis approaches. Among the analyzed studies, most adopt qualitative methods, relying on classroom observations, interviews, or case studies to analyze teaching outcomes. A smaller number of studies apply quantitative methods to validate the Kodály Method’s effectiveness in pitch and rhythm training through experimental designs (Wang, 2016). Mixed-method studies combine qualitative and quantitative approaches, analyzing both classroom details and empirical data to validate teaching effects (Zhu, 2022). However, despite the diversity in research methods, existing literature remains largely qualitative, with a lack of long-term experimental studies featuring control groups. This limitation creates a notable research gap regarding the sustainability and scalability of the Kodály Method in teaching.

Additionally, existing studies reveal an insufficient focus on technological integration. For example, there is a lack of systematic exploration into how the Kodály Method can integrate modern educational technologies, such as artificial intelligence (AI) and virtual reality (VR). These technologies have the potential to enhance teaching interactivity, support personalized learning experiences, and provide convenient access to instructional resources. However, current research remains primarily focused on traditional teaching methods, with limited case studies on technology integration. Future research should address this gap by focusing on experimental studies and practical cases that explore the application of modern technologies in the Kodály Method. By doing so, researchers can provide both theoretical frameworks and practical insights to support the innovative development of the teaching methodology (Table 4).

Table 4: Research Design and Methods

Author	Research Method	Data Source	Sample Scope	Analysis Method
Deng (2018)	Surveys, non-participatory classroom observation, teaching experiments, and data collection	6 kindergarten classes in Kunming; 72 survey responses and detailed classroom recordings	26 children (3–4 years old) and 6 preschool teachers observed over 16 weeks	Quantitative analysis (survey data statistics) and qualitative analysis (classroom behavior observation)
Wang (2023)	Literature review, surveys, interviews, classroom observation, and action research	Music literacy tests, surveys, and interview records from higher vocational schools	Three vocational schools; 15 classes with 60 teachers and selected students	Quantitative (data analysis) and qualitative analysis (interviews and observation)

					feedback); regression analysis
Han (2016)	Literature review, case studies, classroom practice, and comparative research	Domestic and international music education research, classroom data, teacher and student feedback	Preschool music education teachers	Preschool music education students and teachers	Qualitative (classroom observation, case studies) and quantitative analysis (teaching results comparison)
Tang (2023)	Meta-analysis and systematic review	CNKI, Wanfang, and other databases; 6,199 studies screened, 32 included	32 studies		Quantitative analysis (effect size calculations, subgroup comparison, heterogeneity tests)
Qiu (2018)	Literature review, surveys, observation, experimental research, and case analysis	Shandong Jinan Preschool Colleges, Wenhai Art School, and Pingyin Experimental Kindergarten	300 preschool teachers and students, 15 classes;	classroom observations from Sept 2012 to June 2013	Quantitative analysis (survey statistics), qualitative analysis (interviews and observation feedback), case summaries
Yang (2016)	Literature review, surveys, observation, and interviews	Data from 4 secondary vocational schools	8 classes with 16 music teachers		Statistical analysis and case research
Song (2016)	Literature review, surveys, classroom observation, case analysis, and teaching experiments	Music literacy course records, survey data, and interview records	Preschool teachers and students across multiple grade levels		Quantitative analysis (survey data statistics), qualitative analysis (classroom observation and case study analysis)
Zhu (2022)	Literature review, surveys, interviews, and classroom observation	Changsha Preschool Teacher Schools; survey and interview data	Preschool teachers and students		Qualitative analysis (data coding) and case analysis

Findings 3: Teaching Effects and Impact

The Kodály Method has demonstrated significant teaching effects in China's early childhood education programs, particularly in enhancing students' musical skills and artistic expression. Studies indicate that rhythm training, pitch perception exercises, and harmonic foundation learning under the Kodály Method significantly improve students' musical perception (Qiu, 2023; Kong, 2023). Additionally, the method enhances students' creativity and musical expression (Kong, 2023; Yang, 2022). These outcomes are reflected not only in improved musical skills but also in stimulating students' learning interest and helping them develop a deeper understanding of music content (Liu, 2022). In terms of teacher training, the Kodály Method, through systematic training models, significantly improves teachers' classroom implementation skills and teaching innovation abilities (Yi, 2023; Yang, 2023). This highlights the method's dual value in advancing both teacher and student development. However, existing research primarily focuses on short-term classroom performance, with limited studies on the long-term impacts of the method on students' musical literacy and professional skills.

Findings 4: Research Gaps and Challenges

Despite extensive studies on the Kodály Method, notable research gaps remain in its specific applications. For instance, areas such as sight-singing, ear training, and music initiation courses are underexplored. Additionally, the unequal distribution of educational resources restricts the application of the method in rural schools (Wang, 2023; Yang, 2016). Ding (2023) and Yang (2022) emphasize that adapting the Kodály Method to local educational resources and developing localized instructional materials are essential for addressing these issues. Furthermore, research on cross-disciplinary integration is limited. Current domestic studies mainly focus on musical skills, lacking exploration of the Kodály Method's role in fostering language development and cognitive growth (Zhang, 2017).

Findings 5: Personalized Learning Needs and Long-term Research Deficiencies

While the Kodály Method emphasizes that “music belongs to everyone,” few studies address individual differences in students’ musical abilities, such as their learning interests and prior knowledge (Ding, 2023). There is also a lack of teaching designs and evaluation systems tailored to personalized learning needs. Existing research focuses predominantly on short-term outcomes, such as immediate classroom performance and feedback, with little attention given to the long-term impacts on students’ musical literacy and professional skills (Yang, 2022; Wang, 2023). Establishing a long-term tracking framework to dynamically evaluate the Kodály Method’s influence on students’ comprehensive abilities is essential.

5. Conclusion

Despite its promising results, the implementation of the Kodály Method in Chinese early childhood education faces several challenges. Teacher training inadequacies are a major barrier. The method requires teachers to possess high levels of musical literacy, teaching skills, and innovative instructional abilities. However, many teachers, particularly in vocational early childhood education programs, have not received systematic training, which limits its effectiveness (Ding, 2023; Yang, 2022). This issue is especially pronounced in rural areas, where teacher qualifications and specialized training are insufficient. Unequal resource distribution further complicates the situation. Significant disparities in educational resources between urban and rural areas hinder the widespread adoption of the Kodály Method. Even when teachers possess the required expertise, inadequate access to teaching materials and instruments limits their ability to achieve desired outcomes (Wang, 2023).

The localization of teaching content remains another challenge. As a method with European cultural roots, its successful implementation in China requires adjustments to align with local cultural contexts. For example, there is a need to carefully integrate Chinese folk music and teaching materials into the Kodály Method’s framework (Kong, 2023). Some researchers propose using Chinese traditional music to enhance students’ interest and foster cultural identity, but practical case studies remain limited (You, 2018). Lastly, while most studies evaluate short-term outcomes, research on the long-term effects of the Kodály Method on students’ musical development, comprehensive abilities, and cultural identity remains insufficient.

Future research should expand beyond the focus on vocal music and musical skills training, exploring the Kodály Method’s cross-disciplinary applications, such as its impact on language development, cognitive abilities, and social-emotional learning. For instance, international studies have combined the Kodály Method with language acquisition and cognitive development, but similar research is limited in China. Additionally, regional disparities in

educational resources require urgent attention. Large-scale, multi-center studies across urban and rural areas can provide insights into the specific needs of different regions and inform localized implementation strategies. To validate the method's long-term effectiveness, longitudinal studies lasting 3 to 5 years should be conducted. These studies can employ focus groups, experimental classes, and quantitative analysis to evaluate the Kodály Method's impact on students' musical skills, creativity, and cultural identity. In conclusion, strengthening teacher training, promoting localized teaching adaptations, integrating modern educational technologies, and conducting long-term empirical studies will enable the sustainable and widespread application of the Kodály Method in China's early childhood education. These efforts will not only optimize the music education system but also contribute to the preservation and promotion of Chinese cultural heritage.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this study.

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