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# Beyond the Baton, From Gesture to Growth: Reimagining Choral Conducting for Leadership, Empathy, and Emotional-Social Intelligence in the IB MYP

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**ABSTRACT**

This paper investigates the potential of choral conducting as a pedagogical tool for cultivating leadership, communication, and emotional growth within the International Baccalaureate Middle Years Programme (IB MYP). Despite the MYP's commitment to holistic, inquiry-based learning, the MYP Arts Guide lacks domain-specific frameworks for specialized practices such as conducting, leaving teachers to design curricula and assessments independently. This absence has led to inconsistency, inequity, and missed opportunities to integrate music education with social-emotional learning (SEL). Drawing on a Design and Development Research (DDR) framework, this study employed a sequential mixed-methods approach, incorporating document analysis, teacher interviews, and a Delphi expert panel. Findings revealed systemic gaps in curricular scaffolding and identified six essential domains for adolescent conducting education: basic conducting techniques, aural and listening skills, nonverbal communication, repertoire and score understanding, rehearsal strategy and problem-solving, and fundamental choral skills. Each domain was mapped to outcomes in emotional and social intelligence, demonstrating how conducting fosters self-regulation, empathy, intercultural understanding, collaboration, and collective identity. A validated choral conducting framework is proposed, aligning technical progression with the IB's learner profile and broader goals of 21st-century education. The implications are significant: for IB schools, the framework enhances consistency and equity; for teachers, it provides research-based scaffolding and reduces workload; for students, it reframes music education as a pathway to leadership and resilience. Ultimately, the study advances music education as both an artistic and humanistic

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practice, contributing to global debates on equity, curriculum design, and the transformative potential of the arts.

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## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Choral conducting, often perceived as a highly technical musical activity, encompasses leadership, nonverbal communication, and emotional engagement, making it uniquely suited to foster emotional and social intelligence (ESI) among adolescents. Within the International Baccalaureate (IB) framework, this potential is particularly relevant. The IB, founded in 1968, is a globally recognized educational organization offering four programs that emphasize inquiry-based, student-centered, and holistic learning. Among them, the Middle Years Programme (MYP), designed for students aged 11–16, stresses the development of critical thinking, intercultural understanding, and holistic personal growth (IBO, 2018). The MYP is built on conceptual learning, global contexts, and interdisciplinary inquiry, aiming to nurture learners who are reflective, principled, and open-minded—qualities directly aligned with the goals of social and emotional intelligence.

International schools in China have increasingly adopted the IB MYP due to its emphasis on global citizenship, flexibility, and alignment with international university preparation. In these contexts, arts education—including music—is often positioned as a space for intercultural dialogue and identity formation. However, the implementation of the MYP Arts framework in China has faced challenges, particularly in specialized domains such as choral conducting. While IB schools in China emphasize inquiry and student-centered learning, teachers frequently report difficulties in reconciling the program’s broad standards with the practical demands of discipline-specific teaching (Gu, 2020). Choral conducting, with its potential to build leadership, empathy, and collaboration, is underutilized in these contexts due to the absence of formal guidance in the IB documentation. This paper aimed at developing and validating content standards and assessment strategies for choral conducting in middle school contexts. It positions conducting not only as a musical discipline but also as a pedagogical tool for leadership, communication, and emotional growth within the IB MYP framework.

## **2. PROBLEM STATEMENT**

Despite its philosophical commitment to holistic and inquiry-driven learning, the IB Middle Years Programme (MYP) has been critiqued for lacking sufficient scaffolding in specialized domains such as music and conducting. The MYP Arts Guide (IBO, 2018) outlines broad learning objectives and assessment criteria but omits domain-specific standards that could support complex, embodied practices such as choral conducting. As a result, music educators shoulder the dual burden of designing curriculum and assessment tools while ensuring developmental appropriateness. This creates significant variability across schools, undermining consistency, equity, and comparability of learning outcomes (Dickson, Perry, & Ledger, 2019).

The absence of structured guidance for choral conducting exemplifies this curricular gap. While conducting directly aligns with MYP objectives—such as developing technical and expressive skills, fostering creativity, and engaging in collaborative performance (IBO, 2018)—the lack of formal benchmarks leaves teachers to improvise pedagogical and evaluative strategies. Such improvisation not only risks superficial coverage of conducting skills but also compromises the development of higher-order capacities such as leadership, empathy, and reflective communication (Varvarigou & Durrant, 2011). This is particularly problematic in the context of international schools, where diverse student populations demand pedagogies that are both inclusive and culturally responsive (Hayden & Thompson, 2016).

The inequities are further exacerbated by resource disparities across schools. While some IB institutions employ highly experienced arts educators who can design rigorous frameworks, others lack the expertise or institutional support to provide meaningful conducting instruction (Poonoosamy, 2018). As a result, students' access to leadership-based music learning depends largely on their teachers' individual capacity, perpetuating systemic inequity (OECD, 2024). In China, where the adoption of the MYP has expanded significantly, these issues are magnified. Schools often struggle to reconcile the global vision of the IB with local expectations for measurable outcomes, leading to tensions between creativity, assessment rigor, and cultural applicability (Gu, 2020; Tan, 2021).

This study addresses these structural deficiencies by proposing a choral conducting framework that explicitly embeds leadership, communication, and emotional growth outcomes within the IB MYP. By aligning technical skill development with theories of emotional and social intelligence (Goleman, 1995; Mayer, Caruso, & Salovey, 2016), the framework not only strengthens musical pedagogy but also ensures that conducting is recognized as a vehicle for holistic learner development. The framework aims to bridge the gap between curricular ideals and classroom realities, offering teachers research-based tools to reduce workload while ensuring equity, consistency, and alignment with the IB learner profile attributes.

### **3. Objectives**

The research seeks to achieve the following objectives:

1. To examine the limitations of the IB MYP Arts Guide in relation to choral conducting content and assessment.
2. To identify essential skills, competencies, and assessment strategies for adolescent conducting education.
3. To design a content standard aligned with IB MYP objectives and criteria.
4. To develop assessment strategies for measuring conducting-related leadership, communication, and emotional growth.
5. To validate the pedagogical soundness of the proposed standards through expert consensus.
6. To evaluate the feasibility of integrating the framework within IB MYP contexts from teacher and coordinator perspectives.

### **4. LITERATURE REVIEW**

The literature underscores the multidimensional significance of choral conducting in adolescent education, positioning it not merely as a technical discipline but as a holistic pedagogical practice that integrates cognitive, social, and emotional domains. Conducting requires the synthesis of musical interpretation, ensemble leadership, and nonverbal communication, making it uniquely suited to foster emotional and social intelligence (ESI). Its pedagogical relevance can be understood through several theoretical lenses.

From a constructivist perspective, learning is socially mediated, with knowledge constructed through interaction and scaffolding (Vygotsky, 1978). In the choral context, the conductor acts as both guide and co-learner, shaping musical meaning collaboratively with the ensemble. Social learning theory further emphasizes how modeling, observation, and feedback in conducting contribute to the acquisition of musical and interpersonal competencies (Bandura, 1986). In parallel, self-regulated learning theory highlights the role of metacognition, motivation, and behavioral control—capacities that conducting

demands as students monitor, evaluate, and refine both gesture and expressive intention (Zimmerman, 2002).

Leadership theories provide an additional framework for understanding the educational impact of conducting. Transformational leadership describes how leaders inspire, motivate, and nurture shared vision, qualities directly applicable to music education (Bass, 1999). Research suggests that conductors influence not only musical outcomes but also group identity, motivation, and interpersonal trust (Meyer & Rinn, 2021). In school settings, this positions choral conducting as a pedagogical space for cultivating student leadership and agency, particularly in adolescence when identity formation and social negotiation are critical developmental tasks (Erikson, 1968; McPherson & Welch, 2018).

Within the International Baccalaureate (IB) MYP, flexibility in curriculum design is often celebrated as an opportunity for creativity and contextual adaptation (IBO, 2018). However, research shows that when specialized, embodied practices like conducting lack formal scaffolding, teachers struggle to reconcile broad conceptual aims with concrete pedagogical strategies (Sizmur & Cunningham, 2013; Dickson, Perry, & Ledger, 2019). This lack of structured guidance is particularly significant in international school contexts, where diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds require carefully designed pedagogies to ensure equity and inclusivity (Hayden & Thompson, 2016; Tan, 2021).

Recent scholarship has also drawn attention to the social-emotional benefits of choral participation. Participation in choirs has been shown to enhance emotional resilience, empathy, and social cohesion by creating spaces of collective identity and belonging (Sutela, Paananen, & Lehtonen, 2020; Parker, 2018). Levstek and Banerjee (2021) further argue that music education fosters not only self-expression but also intercultural understanding, making it essential in globalized educational settings like IB schools in China. Choral conducting amplifies these outcomes by placing students in leadership roles where nonverbal communication, listening, and empathy are indispensable for ensemble success.

Critically, the literature reveals a disjunction between curricular aspirations and practical realities. While the IB emphasizes holistic development and learner attributes such as empathy, communication, and collaboration, these ideals remain aspirational without explicit integration into subject-specific frameworks (Creagh, Klenowski, & Radoll, 2023). Choral conducting, by its very nature, offers a pedagogical means to embody these ideals, bridging the gap between technical instruction and social-emotional learning. Thus, the research situates conducting not merely as skill acquisition but as a pedagogy of leadership, emotional intelligence, and social intelligence—a reimagining necessary for 21st-century education.

## **5. METHODOLOGY**

This study employed a Design and Development Research (DDR) framework, which is widely recognized for its capacity to generate practical solutions to educational problems while contributing to theoretical understanding (Richey & Klein, 2014). DDR is particularly appropriate for arts-based education, as it allows researchers to move iteratively between problem identification, framework design, and validation, ensuring both contextual relevance and pedagogical robustness (Plomp & Nieveen, 2013). The choice of DDR reflects the study's dual aim: (a) to address the curricular deficiency of the IB MYP in relation to choral conducting, and (b) to contribute to the growing scholarship on music education as a vehicle for leadership and social-emotional learning.

The research followed a sequential mixed-methods approach, which enabled the integration of qualitative depth with quantitative rigor (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). The process unfolded in three interlinked phases.

### **Phase One: Need Analysis**

The first phase involved a systematic document analysis of the IB Arts Guide and supplementary materials, focusing on the extent to which choral conducting was represented in curricular objectives, assessment criteria, and developmental progression. Document analysis provided a foundation for identifying structural gaps and inconsistencies (Bowen, 2009). This was triangulated with semi-structured interviews conducted with IB music teachers across diverse international schools. Teacher perspectives offered rich, contextualized insights into the challenges of implementing conducting instruction without domain-specific standards. This combination of sources ensured a comprehensive understanding of the curricular landscape and the lived realities of teachers (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2018).

### **Phase Two: Framework Design**

Informed by findings from Phase One, the second phase focused on designing a choral conducting framework. The framework was scaffolded using Bloom's taxonomy (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001), ensuring a progression from foundational knowledge and skills to higher-order competencies such as analysis, synthesis, and leadership in rehearsal contexts. Leadership theory, particularly transformational leadership (Bass, 1999), provided a lens to incorporate emotional and social growth outcomes into the framework. This theoretical integration ensured that the framework was not merely a technical curriculum but also a tool for nurturing empathy, communication, and collaborative agency.

### **Phase Three: Validation through Delphi Method**

The third phase employed the Grounded Delphi method (Okoli & Pawlowski, 2004), engaging an international panel of experts in music education, choral conducting, and curriculum design. Experts participated in multiple rounds of surveys, providing feedback on the relevance, clarity, and feasibility of the proposed framework and assessment strategies. Delphi methodology was selected for its strength in building consensus among geographically dispersed experts and its ability to refine complex constructs (Hsu & Sandford, 2007). The iterative rounds enhanced both the reliability and validity of the outcomes, as the panel moved from divergent perspectives to convergence on essential domains and standards.

### **Ensuring Rigor and Trustworthiness**

To ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the study, multiple strategies were employed. Triangulation across data sources (documents, interviews, and expert input) enhanced validity by cross-verifying findings (Denzin, 2012). Member-checking with teacher participants ensured that interpretations accurately reflected their experiences (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Thematic coding of qualitative data followed Braun and Clarke's (2019) reflexive approach, which emphasizes iterative engagement with the data and researcher reflexivity. These measures collectively ensured that the framework was not

only theoretically robust but also pedagogically feasible, contextually relevant, and responsive to teacher and student needs.

In sum, the chosen methodology combined the analytical rigor of qualitative inquiry with the consensus-building strengths of Delphi research, resulting in a validated framework that bridges curricular gaps in the IB MYP while contributing to broader discussions in music education research.

## 6. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study underscore a systemic curricular gap within the IB MYP Arts Guide, where conducting is conspicuously absent as a formally recognized content area. While the Guide emphasizes creativity, inquiry, and collaboration (IBO, 2018), its lack of domain-specific scaffolding leaves teachers to improvise instructional strategies, resulting in inconsistency and inequity across schools. Teacher interviews confirmed this issue, with participants citing excessive workload in designing assessment tools without sufficient institutional guidance (Visser, 2010). This resonates with broader critiques of the IB framework, which note that flexibility, though philosophically appealing, often translates into uneven implementation and structural deficiencies (Creagh, Klenowski, & Radoll, 2023).

The Delphi study provided empirical clarity by identifying six domains critical for adolescent conducting education:

- a) Basic Conducting Techniques
- b) Aural and Listening Skills
- c) Nonverbal Communication
- d) Repertoire and Score Understanding
- e) Rehearsal Strategy and Problem-Solving
- f) Fundamental Choral Skills

These domains not only structure technical progression but also align directly with emotional and social intelligence outcomes, as illustrated in Figure 1.



*Figure 1. Theoretical and Pedagogical Framework Linking Choral Conducting Skills to Emotional and Social Intelligence Outcomes.*

- Basic Conducting Techniques foster discipline, confidence, and resilience, outcomes closely aligned with the principle of self-regulation in self-regulated learning theory (Zimmerman, 2002).
- Aural and Listening Skills promote empathy and social awareness, reflecting the central tenets of emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1995). Active listening in ensembles cultivates attentiveness to others' contributions, reinforcing mutual respect.
- Nonverbal Communication develops interpersonal sensitivity, expressive clarity, and trust. Conductors' gestures become a shared language that fosters cohesion and collective identity (Nagoski, 2010).
- Repertoire and Score Understanding broadens students' cultural awareness and interpretive agency, facilitating intercultural empathy and appreciation of diverse musical traditions (Levstek & Banerjee, 2021).
- Rehearsal Strategy and Problem-Solving embody leadership, collaboration, and adaptability, hallmarks of transformational leadership theory (Bass, 1999). Through problem-solving in rehearsals, students practice democratic decision-making and shared responsibility.
- Fundamental Choral Skills reinforce group belonging, social cohesion, and collective efficacy, outcomes rooted in Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory. Singing together creates embodied experiences of solidarity and collective purpose (Sutela, Paananen, & Lehtonen, 2020).

Taken together, these domains demonstrate that choral conducting cannot be reduced to technical mastery alone; rather, it functions as a leadership pedagogy and a platform for social-emotional learning. This reframing bridges the gap between IB's aspirational learner profile attributes—such as being communicators, principled, and caring—and the day-to-day realities of classroom practice.

Critically, embedding these domains into formal content standards and assessment rubrics addresses multiple challenges. First, it reduces teacher workload by providing structured tools (Dickson, Perry, & Ledger, 2019). Second, it enhances equity across international schools, ensuring that student access to leadership-based music learning does not depend solely on teacher capacity (OECD, 2024). Third, it validates the holistic role of music education in adolescent development, positioning conducting as both an artistic and humanistic practice that integrates technical, emotional, and social growth.

## 7. IMPLICATIONS FOR MUSIC EDUCATION

The implications of this study are multi-dimensional, extending across institutional, pedagogical, and learner-centered levels, while also addressing broader debates surrounding curriculum equity and the role of music education in 21st-century schooling.

For IB schools, the adoption of a structured choral conducting framework offers an opportunity to strengthen the alignment between philosophical ideals and practical classroom realities. While the IB MYP emphasizes flexibility and inquiry-driven pedagogy (IBO, 2018), the absence of subject-specific scaffolding in conducting has led to inconsistencies in implementation across schools (Dickson, Perry, & Ledger, 2019). A validated framework addresses this gap by ensuring consistency and comparability of learning outcomes, particularly in international schools where teacher expertise and resources vary significantly. It also supports institutional accountability, providing clear

benchmarks for evaluating student development in line with the IB Learner Profile attributes, such as being communicators, risk-takers, and caring individuals (IBO, 2020).

For teachers, the framework has the potential to reduce workload and professional stress. Teacher burnout and workload intensification have been documented as global concerns in international education (Creagh, Klenowski, & Radoll, 2023). In the IB context, where teachers often design their own unit frameworks, the lack of domain-specific resources exacerbates these pressures (Poonoosamy, 2018). A conducting framework provides pedagogically valid tools for instruction, assessment, and progression mapping, allowing teachers to shift their focus from administrative tasks to meaningful pedagogical engagement. Furthermore, it encourages professional growth by integrating research-based practices and positioning teachers as facilitators of both technical skill and social-emotional development.

For students, the framework reframes music education as a pathway to leadership, empathy, and emotional resilience—capacities increasingly recognized as essential for 21st-century citizenship (OECD, 2023). Conducting provides opportunities for adolescents to exercise nonverbal communication, active listening, and decision-making, fostering skills transferable to other domains of life and learning. Research indicates that arts-based leadership experiences support identity formation, self-efficacy, and intercultural understanding (Levstek & Banerjee, 2021; Parker, 2018). In the context of international schools in China, where students navigate complex cultural and linguistic intersections, conducting can also serve as a site of intercultural dialogue, fostering inclusivity and global mindedness (Tan, 2021).

At the systemic level, this study illustrates how flexible international curricula can accommodate specialized practices like conducting without undermining their philosophical principles. While curriculum flexibility is often framed as a strength of the IB, scholars argue that it risks perpetuating inequities if not supported by robust structures and resources (Sizmur & Cunningham, 2013). The proposed framework demonstrates that curricular flexibility and standardization are not mutually exclusive. Instead, when thoughtfully designed, content-specific frameworks can enhance equity by ensuring access to high-quality, research-informed pedagogies across diverse contexts.

Ultimately, the implications of this research extend beyond the IB. It contributes to global debates on the role of arts education in fostering social-emotional learning (SEL), leadership, and holistic development. By embedding emotional and social intelligence into conducting pedagogy, the framework positions music education as not only an artistic endeavor but also a vehicle for cultivating empathetic, resilient, and socially responsible learners, thereby advancing the broader aims of education in the 21st century.

## **8. CONCLUSION:**

This paper concludes that choral conducting, when supported by structured content standards and assessments, serves as a powerful pedagogy for cultivating leadership, communication, and emotional growth in adolescent learners. By addressing gaps in the IB MYP Arts Guide, the study demonstrates how curriculum design can balance flexibility with equity, empowering teachers while nurturing students' emotional and social intelligence. Conducting is not merely a technical skill; it is a vehicle for empathy, resilience, and collaborative identity formation. Future research should explore classroom implementation and longitudinal impacts on student development, thereby

advancing the role of arts education as a cornerstone of holistic, human-centered learning.

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