

# **The Impact of Music Education Curriculum Design on Students' Artistic Cognition from the Perspective of Cultural Diversity**

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**Abstract:** The study investigates the impact of designing the education curriculum with a multicultural perspective on students' artistic cognitive abilities in music education in China. Qualitative research, including semi-structured interviews, music class observations, and document analysis, formed the basis of the study. The findings suggest that music education has undergone significant changes, but a multicultural approach is not yet widely adopted. The upgraded curriculum now includes multicultural music exposure, aiming to enhance students' cross-cultural understanding and contribute to their cognitive development. The cognitive abilities cultivated through a multicultural perspective in music pedagogies include critical analysis, problem-solving, creativity, innovation, and collaborative skills. Specifically, critical thinking receives significant emphasis in the evolving context of music education. Despite existing barriers and impediments that limit the full potential of a multicultural perspective, the study asserts that dedicated actions and stakeholder engagement can help overcome these challenges and enable the realisation of strategic benefits associated with multicultural music education.

**Keywords:** Music Education China; Chinese Multicultural Music Education Curriculum; Cross-Cultural Music Education in China; Sociocultural Development of Students through Cross-Cultural Music Education; Cognitive Development of Children through Cross-Cultural Music Education

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

The development of artistic capabilities through music education has been well-established in the existing literature. Music education is delivered in the early childhood programs as it not only helped in the development of musical skills, but also such education is the means to polish and develop the cognitive abilities (Aslam et al., 2020; Du & Leung, 2022). As a result, Tam and Milfont have pointed out that skills like creativity and innovation, attention to details, problem solving, and critical expression could be significantly developed through music education (Tam & Milfont, 2020). As globalisation has been emerging as a dominant trend, resulting in the increased migration and settlement of people in different parts of the world, a multicultural environment has been emerging around the world (Burnard, 2012). Even in countries like China, where the Hans were once

having more than 92% of the total representation, multiculturalism has been emerging as a dominant trend in the country, shaping opportunities in the future of music education (Li et al., 2023). As per the findings of Liu, there are 56 different ethnic groups living within the country (Liu et al., 2022). The author has pointed out that although such groups were once confined to different regions in the country, due to significant urbanisation witnessed in the country, ethnic groups including Mongols, Miao, Zhuang, Tujia, Hui, etc. have now migrated to different large cities, and they are now considered as emerging ethnic groups in such areas. As China has a rich culture and traditional heritage, the intersection of artistic cognitive capabilities development through music education in an increasingly multicultural environment offered exciting opportunities. Although in the past, music education in the country has largely focused on the mainstream culture of the Hans majority, however, as the policymakers now understand the significance of multiculturalism and the significant opportunities this could create in the future of music education, significant transformation in the case of music education could be witnessed within the country (Hallam, 2010). Although the Chinese government and policymakers at the Ministry of Education have been maintaining an open spectrum approach as they have been allowing for the incorporation of multicultural music education in different parts of the country, whether such practices could contribute to students' cognitive development and abilities or not, this issue has not yet gotten the desired attention from the academicians in China (Aslam et al., 2020). Realising the significance of such emerging trends and the changing music education industry in China, this study aims to critically analyse the impact of education curriculum design on fostering students' artistic cognitive capabilities from a multicultural perspective in China. The research thus analyses the integration of cross-cultural elements and musical genres on students' cognitive development and evaluates how this could contribute to the betterment of creativity and innovation, attention to details, problem solving, and critical expression of students. The study adds to the existing literature as it provides contemporary evidence of how musical education using the multicultural perspective could better shape students' cognitive skills and capabilities. The study also has practical significance as it guides the Chinese policymakers on how equitable access to high-quality, culturally diverse music education could foster better cognitive development of Chinese students, besides contributing to students' artistic skills.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Theoretical Framework

The analysis of existing literature concerning the impact of education curriculum design on fostering students' artistic cognitive capabilities from a multicultural perspective in China reveals dominant views that have been found (Aslam et al., 2020; Karkina et al., 2022). This includes the view of writers who believe in cognitive psychology and those who take the sociocultural approach (Lee, 2020).

### 2.2 Cognitive Psychology Perspective

The cognitive psychology mainly stressed the impact of music education on the mental state of children, as this school of thought strongly believes that through music education, students' cognitive abilities could be enhanced (Du & Leung, 2022). Most of the work in this regard is based on the seminal work of Schellenberg, who presented empirical findings that music education in early childhood could significantly enhance the general Intelligent Quotient (IQ) score (Schellenberg, 2004). Considering the impact of music education on the IQ level of children, the author stressed that the cognitive development of children could be fostered through music education. Basing their work on the framework adopted by Schellenberg (Schellenberg, 2004), Hallam has further found that music education could significantly enhance the problem-solving capabilities and critical thinking in early childhood (Hallam, 2010); hence, music education should be adopted in early childhood education. Strait and Kraus also benefitted (Strait & Kraus, 2011) from the framework presented by Schellenberg, and they found that music education could foster better memory and spatial-temporal reasoning of the child (Schellenberg, 2004); hence, such should be pursued in the early childhood education programs.

### 2.3 Sociocultural Perspective

Contrary to this cognitive psychology approach, the sociocultural school of thought in the field stressed that cultural context plays a pivotal role in shaping the cognitive and artistic capabilities of children in their early childhood (Aslam et al., 2020). In this regard, Burnard has stressed that the artistic capabilities of an individual are not just the result of an individual's cognitive capabilities (Burnard, 2012); rather, the skills and capabilities that an artist held are significantly affected by the cultural and social environment where he/she practiced his/her musical skills. Brandstrom

has also pointed out that music education is not just the means through which the cognitive capabilities of a child could be developed (Brandstrom, 1999); rather, the real phenomenon in this regard is that the curriculum of music education is designed to cultivate cultural understanding, gratitude, and enhanced artistic countenance.

#### 2.4 Hybrid Approach

A third view has also emerged in the field, which could be termed a hybrid view, which is based on the intersectional approach (Zhou, 2022). The view integrates the viewpoint of both cognitive psychology and sociocultural approach and considers artistic cognitive capabilities as multifaceted in nature, which is affected by both cognitive development factors as well as the sociocultural factors (Lasauskiene & Sun, 2019). This view is supported by Deliege and Wiggins (Deliège & Wiggins, 2006). Zhang has pointed out that the intersection view is a more suitable view (Zhang, 2017), particularly in the changing global dynamics, where the sociocultural diversity found in different parts of the world has a significant impact on the music education and cognitive capabilities of artists. For fostering better music capabilities, focusing on the cognitive factors and realising the impact of sociocultural factors could help in fostering greater music education (Lee, 2020).

#### 2.5 Intercultural Factors and its Impact on Music Education Curriculum Design

As cultural diversity has been increasing with the passage of time, scholars around the world have been paying closer attention to analyse how the cross-cultural environment in different parts of the world is providing opportunities and posing challenges in terms of music education and curriculum design (Yuan & Song, 2017). As per the findings of Du and Leung, the incorporation of multicultural perspective in music education could add significant value to music education as the best practices that were once confined to a particular culture could be incorporated for wider benefits (Du & Leung, 2022). Considering the sociocultural perspective, the multicultural perspective of the music education could be significantly helpful, as such could help in the appreciation of other cultures, and thus individuals belonging to different cultures could come together (Tam & Milfont, 2020). Li has found that through the adoption of a multicultural perspective for music education (Li, 2016), cross-cultural dialogue and understanding could be promoted. Wang considered the

perspective as extremely helpful, as it challenged the ethnocentric view and could help in fostering an inclusive and pluralistic perspective that could enhance artistic expression (Wang, 2014). Li, Xue, and Heq have further pointed out that the use of a multicultural perspective could also benefit the cognitive development of children (Li et al., 2023), as the multicultural perspective could lead towards improved cognitive capabilities. This is particularly true considering the fact that, from the multicultural perspective, students could experience a variety of musical traditions (Liu et al., 2022; Liu et al., 2020). According to Strait and Karus, such multicultural exposure could be more beneficial not only for the development of better cultural understanding but also for students to hand on diverse cognitive skills emerging from diverse historical and social contexts (Strait & Kraus, 2011). Ilari, Chen-Hafteck, and Crawford have found that the multicultural perspective is extremely helpful for the development of creativity and problem-solving skills (Ilari et al., 2013), as the multicultural environment provides children the opportunity to interact with individuals who belong to diverse cultures and have diverse thinking patterns and problem-solving approaches (Villodre, 2014). By working and interacting with individuals of diverse cultures, children attending the music class could enhance their critical thinking skills and have the opportunity to appreciate the nuances and complexities of artistic creation (Parker, 2015). On the other hand, students who lacked such multicultural exposure have been found to be less tolerating with nuances and complexities, which in turn negatively affect their artistic creation.

## 2.6 Challenges of Multicultural Music Education Curriculum

Irrespective of the range of opportunities that could be captured through effective pursuit of multicultural perspectives in music education that have been explored in the above section, multiculturalism is not without challenges. There are a range of challenges that could be witnessed while executing a multicultural perspective for music education curriculum, which include the significant tension between contemporary music and traditional music (Parada-Cabaleiro et al., 2022). The pursuit of traditional music requires resources that are completely different from the resources that are needed in contemporary music education (Miettinen, 2021). As a result, organisations that are leveraging the multicultural perspective have to invest in diverse resources and have to ensure the desired support and teaching competencies that could ensure the pursuit of both types simultaneously (Aslam et al., 2020). Furthermore, Parada-Cabaleiro, Batliner, and Schedl have pointed out that the pursuit of a

music curriculum that is inclusive and based on a multicultural perspective could still be lacking the desired equity and access to high-quality (Parada-Cabaleiro et al., 2022), culturally responsive music education. This is particularly true considering the fact that multiculturalism has been increasing with the passage of time. According to Li, Xue, and He, even countries like China that is generally perceived as having a common culture and where there was a lesser impact of multiculturalism in the past have been going through the changing processes (Li et al., 2023). Due to the extreme level of urbanisation witnessed in China, diverse cultural inhabitants in the country that were once confined to rural areas and countryside of China have now migrated to different large cities (Aslam et al., 2020). These individuals, representing cultures including Zhuang, Yi, Hui, Tujia, Uyghur, Dong, etc. are now constituting part of large cities in China. Thus, although multiculturalism could be witnessed in the country, and considering the multiculturalism perspective and added benefits associated with the concept, it should be incorporated in the curriculum of music education (Li, 2016). However, equitable access and representation of multiculturalism in the music education could be significantly challenging for the policymakers in the country (Yuan & Song, 2017).

### 3. RESEARCH DESIGN

#### 3.1 Research Methodology

The research design that has been adopted in this study that investigates the impact of education curriculum design on fostering student's artistic cognitive capabilities from a multicultural perspective in China is a qualitative study. The qualitative research design is well-suited for the study, as the investigator was interested in the deeper exploration of the core research question that could not have been possible through the use of quantitative research methodology. Using the qualitative design, in-depth analysis of the contextual factors in the Chinese music industry has been carried out.

#### 3.2 Data Collection Methods

There are multiple data collection methods that have been utilised in this study, which helped in a more comprehensive data collection process. There are different major data collection methods utilised in this study, which include semi-structured interviews, classroom observation, and document analysis. First, semi-structured interviews have been conducted

with professional teachers and administrative staff members who are engaged in music education. These individuals were well-versed with the changing pattern of the industry and how better opportunities in terms of music teaching have been emerging in an increasingly multicultural environment. Second, the investigator used the observation tools, whereas the music lessons at selected music schools have been personally witnessed to analyse the extent to which cultural diversity is found in such schools and how such diversity is reflected in the music teaching and learning. Third, the investigator collected and analysed secondary data through the document analysis method. Different documents that have been collected for this study include education curricula that is thought in early child education and primary level, a policy framework for music education, and music educational material that various organisations have designed. These documents will be analysed to assess the extent to which multiculturalism has been incorporated in music education within the country.

### 3.3 Sampling Strategy and Site Selection for Observation Research

The sampling that has been used in the study is based on a purposive sampling strategy, whereas those participants have been selected for the study who fulfilled a set criteria. The criteria include diverse cultural backgrounds. Accessibility and willingness to participate in the study were the other criteria that have been observed for the selection of the sample in this study. A total of 14 participants have been selected in the study who belonged to four different ethnic groups. Using the sampling process, representation of the diverse culture in the study has been ensured, and thus the changing nature of the music industry has been analysed from diverse perspectives. In addition, for the sake of observation, five different schools have been visited where the music educational classes have been observed. The observation has been carried out following a solid observation protocol that has been specifically developed for the study, which helped in analysing pedagogical approach, multicultural perspective in music, and the artistic capabilities that have been developed and have been carefully analysed. The sites for the study have been selected on the basis of a purposive sampling strategy, whereas diversity has been observed to select a particular site for the sake of observation.

### 3.4 Data Analysis

As there are different data collection methods used in this study, the investigator also used diverse data analysis methods for analysing the

collected data and information. For the analysis of the qualitative data, the investigator employed the content analysis process, whereas all the interview data have been first transcribed and coded. The codes were generated on the basis of the literature analysed in the study. The coded data has then been analysed through the thematic analysis process, whereas different themes have been constructed and relevant responses of the interviewees have been transferred to a particular theme. The process that has been thus followed helped in a more objective analysis of qualitative data and information. The observation that the investigator made and the relevant notes have also been transferred to relevant themes of the research. The same is the case with the document analysis, whereas the observation findings and document analysis process have been primarily used to support or contradict the findings from the qualitative data and the core themes and trends identified through the thematic analysis process.

#### 4. FINDINGS OF RESEARCH

##### 4.1 Integration of Multiculturalism in Music Education

As per the core findings of this study, the music education curriculum has gone through significant changes in the recent past, as diverse perspectives and themes that were specific to different regional or ethnic cultures have not been incorporated in the music education. The majority of the participants of the study asserted that there is a strong need and commitment of different stakeholders to adopt the multiculturalism perspective in the music education, whereas children are exposed to rich and diverse cultures, which has been significantly affecting the music education and practices in the country. According to one of the participants of the study, “The need for the adaptation of the music education has been felt for long; however, concrete steps these days have been taken, which is reflected in the curriculum followed at different levels of music education in the country.” As per this participant, diverse musical cultural attributes that have been adopted now include Bai, Naxi, and Dai, which represent ethnic culture in Yunnan province. Diverse cultural music has been incorporated in the curriculum, whereas some of the participants of the study pointed out that the teaching faculty has also been provided with relevant training that has been specifically organised for such staff members, due to dynamic changes taking place within Chinese music education. As per the majority of the participants of the study, the changing dynamics that are emerging because of the incorporation of the



multicultural perspective in the music education have been not only benefiting the student by developing their understanding of different regional cultures, which will increase the social cohesiveness and promote better working relations amongst diverse groups, but also it has been found in the interviews that the majority of teaching faculty believe that the multicultural perspective has been resulting in fostering greater creativity and innovative thinking of students. One of the participants of the study pointed out that “We are encouraging students to take these diverse musical cultures into consideration and come up with an integrative approach.” The process that the participants thus pointed out has been shaping the creativity and innovative thinking process of the children in the country. Furthermore, other participants of the study pointed out that greater collaboration has been witnessed amongst individuals belonging to diverse cultures. In particular, one of the participants of the study noted that individuals whose cultural value is under consideration come forward and work for fostering and polishing other students’ narratives and understanding of the diverse cultural attributes. The process that has been thus used has been resulting in a synergistic learning experience in the music education throughout the country. The trends that have been identified through such qualitative interviews have also been confirmed, as all the music classes observed by the investigator were incorporating regional music practices. For example, in a music class in Xinjiang, it has been observed that a small child was playing the ‘Rawap,’ which was a traditional music instrument that has been specific to Uyghur culture only. However, such has been adopted in the mainstream musical education because of the changes that have now been taking place within the Chinese musical education. The document analysis also confirmed that schools in provinces like Jiangsu have been provided with special funds for the training and development of their teaching faculty, which reflect the changing trends of the industry. The teachers were provided training so that they could learn and master regional and diverse cultural music that they should be teaching in their future to children in classrooms.

#### 4.2 Opportunities for the Future of Music Education

The trends that are emerging because of the incorporation of the multicultural perspective in music education have not only benefitted the students by developing their understanding of different regional cultures, which will increase social cohesiveness and promote better working relations amongst diverse groups, but also it has been found in the interviews that the majority of teaching faculty believe that the multicultural

perspective has been resulting in fostering greater creativity and innovative thinking of students. One of the participants of the study pointed out that “We are encouraging students to take these diverse musical cultures into consideration and come up with an integrative approach.” The process that the participants thus pointed out has been shaping the creativity and innovative thinking process of the children in the country. Furthermore, other participants of the study pointed out that greater collaboration has been witnessed amongst individuals belonging to diverse cultures. In particular, one of the participants of the study noted that individuals whose cultural value is under consideration come forward and work for fostering and polishing other students’ narratives and understanding of the diverse cultural attributes. The process that has been thus used has been resulting in a synergistic learning experience in the music education throughout the country.

#### 4.3 Challenges of Multiculturalism in Music Education

Irrespective of the current state of music education in China and the significant diversity trends that are emerging within the country, there are different challenges and barriers that have also been identified by the participants of the study. One of the major challenges that has been identified in this regard is whether to focus on contemporary music or traditional music. One of the music teachers explained the dilemma as, “Our previous training and focus was largely contemporary and emerging music trends; however, since the changes that education and culture ministries have proposed in the music education, we are now required to incorporate traditional music.” The participant stressed that such diverse considerations entail a step forward and a step backward that could lead towards nowhere. Another participant of the study pointed out that although the policymakers have devised a curriculum based on a multicultural perspective, the teaching staff has to be trained as per such a multicultural music education perspective; besides, the needed investment has to be made to have relevant instruments and other resources, which has been lacking at present. Another participant in the study pointed out that the incorporation of a multicultural perspective of music education requires responsive pedagogy, which needs significant changes in the current classroom-based instruction system that has been used throughout the country for music education. Furthermore, another participant of the study pointed out that for the incorporation of a multicultural perspective towards music education in the country, different stakeholders have to take on board. The participant pointed out that irrespective of the diverse

strategic benefits associated with multicultural music education, at present the policymakers have not taken different groups, including parents, community members, and administrative staff members, into consideration, who are posing considerable threats and resistance to such multicultural music education. The participants pointed out that different stakeholders in the country have competing objectives for which stakeholder engagement needs to be carried out to effectively balance such diverse perspectives. Additionally, another participant of the study who had been engaged in the music teaching pointed out that “changes in the music curriculum are not enough; rather, such changes should be accompanied with teaching materials and professional development opportunities, which are currently lacking.”.

## 5. CONCLUSION

### 5.1 Summary of the Research

This research analysed the impact of education curriculum design on fostering students’ artistic cognitive capabilities from a multicultural perspective in China. The findings within the study are based on qualitative research, for which semi-structured interviews with the teaching and administrative members of Chinese education, observation of music classes, and document analysis processes have been employed in the study. As per the findings and analysis of the core findings, it has been noted that music education has experienced significant changes in the recent past, whereas the multicultural perspective is not the core theme that has been followed within the country. The curriculum of music education has been upgraded, and students are now exposed to multicultural music, as such exposure is believed to develop their better cross-cultural understanding besides contributing significantly to their cognitive development. The cognitive abilities of the students that have been developed as a result of the multicultural perspective of music pedagogies in China have been resulting in the development of critical analysis skills, improved problem solving, enhanced creativity and innovation, and collaborative working skills. In particular, it has been found that in the changing context of music education, particular emphasis is placed on the development of critical thinking, as such is believed to dictate the future professional development of students. However, there are some barriers that the policymakers and music educators are experiencing at present. At present, although the range of barriers and impediments is limiting the extended synergies that could

have been otherwise realised, through dedicated actions and stakeholder engagement, it is believed that such barriers and impediments could be controlled and the range of strategic benefits associated with the multicultural perspective of music education could be realised.

## 5.2 Implications of Research

There are different implications of research that need due consideration. First, the research has implications for future curriculum design, whereas the policymakers need appropriate measures to balance diverse music perspectives. At present, although some diverse music cultures have been incorporated, effective balancing has been lacking. Second, the research has implications for teaching, as instead of adopting the conventional classroom teaching approach, the majority of the participants of the study believe that a pedagogical approach that could ensure more open-ended interaction, critical thinking, and creative expression should be adopted, as such an approach could help in uncovering the true potentials of multicultural music education in the country. Third, the research has implications for the policymakers, who need to engage different stakeholders, including community members, parents, administrative staff members, and representatives of diverse communities on board. They should be engaged and communicate how the emerging multicultural perspective could be more fruitful for their children, particularly considering the range of sociocultural development and cognitive abilities that could emerge as a result of pursuing such education.

## 5.3 Limitations of Research

There are some limitations of research that should be considered before generalising the findings of the study. First, the findings of the study are qualitative in nature, where there is always a danger of personal bias. Although the investigator adopted sound data collection and analysis strategies in the research, nevertheless the risk of such biases could not be decreased to zero. Second, the study is based on the Chinese context alone, and the findings of the study are true within the Chinese sociocultural and contextual factors only. The findings of the study could not be generalised in other parts of the world, as other regions could have different sociocultural factors and contexts that need due consideration. Third, the study has been conducted from the perspective of educators and students of music in China, and it has been lacking due consideration of policymakers, parents, and other stakeholders. The study thus lacked

extended considerations of different stakeholder interests.

#### 5.4 Recommendations for Future Research

For future research, rather than founding the study on qualitative research design, it should be based on survey research, which could permit the use of quantitative data analysis techniques. Second, the future research in the field should go beyond considering the Chinese perspective alone; rather, a multi-country perspective should be adopted in the future investigation. Such a perspective could help in better comparison of multicultural music education in China with other countries of the world, resulting in more generalisable findings. Third, for future research, it is recommended that the perspective of diverse stakeholders, in addition to students and parents, should be incorporated. Considering this, in future research, equal representations should be given to record the viewpoints of parents, community members, policymakers, administrative staff members, and representatives of diverse communities.

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