

A Comparative Study of the Music Education Systems of China and the United States

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Abstract. Different social environments and cultural atmospheres can shape diverse concepts of music education. By investigating the distinct approaches to music education in China and the United States, this research aims to illuminate their impact on young individuals, even if they do not pursue a musical career. The author examines how child development relates to music education and how China and the United States' music education system impact their own children-citizens before reaching potential problem-solving solutions for the two countries in order to cultivate well-rounded individuals capable of navigating the complexities of society as experienced stakeholders of the highest caliber, as music education possess numerous benefits both physically and mentally. The author finds that Chinese children are often trained with discipline, shortening the overall learning time but lacking creativity, while kids in the United States have much more latitude. Essential differences of the education system also greatly impact how music practitioners provide training to young children in the respective countries.

Keywords: Music Education, China, the United States.

1. Introduction

Different social environments and cultural atmospheres can shape diverse concepts of music education. While various cultural backgrounds may share similar musical languages, the educational systems behind them give rise to distinct approaches to expressing these languages, thereby shaping the different kind of musicians that people now perceives. Throughout the early 20th century, China underwent multiple shifts in its music education philosophy, progressing from a focus on "music and aesthetic" to "beauty appreciation" and ultimately embracing "teaching music with an emphasis on beauty appreciation" [1]. On the other hand, in the United States, educators, researchers, and practitioners have made significant strides in early childhood music education, striving for universal access despite the absence of high-quality programs [2].

Recognizing the integral role of music education in children's development, its importance can be traced back to ancient philosophers like Plato and Aristotle [3]. Studies have consistently demonstrated that engaging children in musical activities and providing corresponding education yield lifelong benefits. Music education becomes a means of connecting children with the cultural heritage of societies [3]. Moreover, compelling evidence suggests that music education enhances self-esteem, motivation, autonomy, and decision-making skills and fosters an appreciation for diversity, thus offering promising prospects for such programs across different countries and demographics [3]. Despite the growing recognition of the significance of childhood music education, there remains a dearth of research comparing and analyzing the historical, current, and future stages of music education in China and the United States and how these systems impact individuals holistically. Existing studies primarily focus on a single education system within either country.

By investigating the distinct approaches to music education in China and the United States—two influential global powers—this research aims to illuminate their impact on young individuals, even if they do not pursue a musical career. By examining the practices employed in childhood music education within these systems and the various styles of musical education, the author intends to derive potential problem-solving solutions based on the experiences of each respective system. The goal is to raise awareness among teachers, school officials, and education policymakers regarding the importance of high-quality childhood music education programs. By exposing children to music as

much and as early as possible, educators can cultivate well-rounded individuals capable of navigating the complexities of society as experienced stakeholders of the highest caliber.

2. Background Of Music Education

Music education has existed for centuries, as stated previously. In the Western world, music education is something that could easily be traced back to the eras of Plato, Aristotle and their contemporaries. Documented music system itself in China could be traced back to 3000 BCE, with formal musical education going back to Confucius, who, like Plato in the West, regarded music instruction as mostly useful for its non-musical values, such as relief of emotion [4].

The Chinese modern systemic musical training planted its roots in the 1910s when a group of scholars who returned from the Western world introduced and developed the Chinese musical education methods, finally shaping up in the 1940s. These scholars proposed that modern music education should bear the purpose of "integrating Chinese and Western cultures" with music conservatories and attaching secondary institutions established in the 1950s. Music training outside professional music conservatories was derived from these systems, most notably with the launch of graded music exams by the different institutions in the early 1990s [5].

America, on the other hand, being a country with only a brief history of 250 years, inherited most of its music education norm from its European predecessors, where the immigrants brought it with them to the new land across the ocean. From 1837 to 1838, the Boston School Committee allowed Lowell Mason to teach music in the Hawes School as a demonstration. This is regarded as the first time music education was introduced to public schools in the United States. Mason gradually spread music education into the entire public education system in the following years and was recognized as the first supervisor for the public school music education model. Boston, under Mason's leadership, became the pioneer city in the 19th century for music education and many cities across the States [6].

In general, music education has been divided into layers, where both mega states provide early music education in primary and secondary schooling systems and later develop into more elite training advancing into undergraduate and graduate programs. Both countries lack innovation in their existing music education programs regardless of the level of training.

3. How Child Development Relates to Music Education

The interest in increasing the understanding of music among very young children has expanded considerably in the last few decades, with academic contributions spanning multiple disciplines, studying the effect in aspects such as sociology and psychology, as well as cultural impacts and its related studies. Most studies of music education are concerned with learning and teaching activities that occur in schools, but music interactions for children at a younger age take place in a wide range of places and situations [7].

Numerous studies have demonstrated the significant benefits of music education on child development. It has been found that music education enhances various aspects of development, including rational, emotional, and motor skills [8]. The incorporation of elements such as sounds, harmony, and singing offers comprehensive training opportunities for the human brain. By stimulating the brain, music exposes students to a rich vocabulary within a short span of time. Additionally, music education exposes students to different languages, laying the groundwork for their ability to understand and communicate in unfamiliar languages [8]. While children possess an innate ability to decipher sounds and words, music education plays a vital role in enhancing these natural abilities. Dr. Kyle Pruett, a clinician and practicing musician from Yale School of Medicine, emphasized that early musical experiences strengthen a child's verbal competence, which is fundamental to social competence [8].

Researchers at the University of California, Irvine, have found that classical music, in particular, strengthens the connection of different parts of the brain that are necessary for thinking [9]. This

might be because of the complexity of the music, as it contains various harmony combinations as well as multiple voices in a musical work. All of these musical features require tremendous brain work to even follow and comprehend them. These researchers have also concluded that the effects of music listening and music making are reflected by changes in activation patterns of the cerebral cortex, a region that is known to impact human performance on higher-level processes, including language, memory, reasoning, thought, learning, decision-making, emotion, intelligence and personality [9]. As a core component of musical training, playing the musical instrument is highly challenging for children. It is a skill that demands different layers of human senses: playing the instrument itself requires physical motor skill on all parts of the body, providing training for coordination, which is an integral physical part of the child's development, as the precise coordination of the hands and fingers on strings or keys demands well-developed "fine motor skills as well as spatial imagination." [9]

Music education not only stimulates cognitive skills and brain development of children. Children are often curious about music as they present their spontaneous joy, which manifests itself in many ways: the desire to hum, the urge to move to music, the joy of hearing their mother's lullaby, or the fascination when a favorite song is heard and recognized. This means engaging children in music education could thus trigger their emotional senses.

Engaging children in musical activities and training, according to researchers, also influence the social and group behavior of children in an impressive manner. A significant portion of musical training takes place within a group setting, encompassing both theoretical and practical aspects. This includes ensemble training, chamber music, group classes, and various other collaborative activities. The natural need for collaboration inside these musical training activities greatly enhances the social competence of children as there are forced to engage in cooperation activities. They are provided with intellectual and emotional behavioral skills which encourage sociability along the way as children learn how to work and get along with their peers. At the same time, they gain a sense of discipline because even the tiniest glitch in an ensemble sabotages the entire performance.

Gaining these skills through music training in childhood years provides various music and non-music-related advantages for children. A survey conducted at a Suzuki workshop in 2005 also revealed that parents report their children who have undertaken musical training are able to concentrate better and longer and are able to approach something new systemically and in small steps, which is evidence that they have developed logical thinking through their musical training. Most parents recognized that playing an instrument helped develop positive character traits in their children and good discipline through daily practice, proving the multiple benefits of musical education and its positive correlation with child development in various layers [9]. Musicians must multitask as they listen, watch, and think at the same time; all of these promote improved coordination. Music fosters memorization skills, thus improving the mental capacity of children, which is a crucial part of their development, especially for the children's brains. In addition to teamwork, music education fosters long-term friendships for children, as they share exciting moments together through music while helping themselves and others develop musical and social abilities at the same time. Music also transcends the limits of language and brings children together regardless of their background, allowing each individual to shine at their respective moments, allowing children to improve their self-confidence and relieve their stress through a healthy outlet, thus stimulating their emotional development and strengthening their toolbox.

4. The Impact of Differences In Music Education Between China And The United States On Children's Development

The music education system for children in China and the United States possesses significant disparities due to the complex conditions of the respective countries. For those who attend a kindergarten, formal music instruction in China begins there, frequently appearing in the art curriculum. Daily music activities frequently involve singing, movement, dancing, clapping, and playing classroom instruments which typically take place in individual classrooms but occasionally

occur in larger groups within the playground areas [4]. Although these training practices initially had a positive starting point, the present state of music education for children has already strayed from its original vision.

Few music training programs are given the necessary emphasis, and informal music training for childhood age in China has become a tool to stress kids out. Researchers in China have found that learning musical instruments has become a burden for many kids throughout the country, as parents and teachers pressure kids to pass graded music exams administered by different testing organizations. The preparation process for such graded music exams is so stressful that children repeatedly report that they lose interest in music [10]. Passing a graded music exam is nowhere near successful music training for children, as many children who pass even the highest grade have zero clue about music theory and general knowledge of their musicianship. Some do not even know the composer of the work they are playing, let alone growing fondness for the music they are playing [10]. Besides, the traditional teacher-student relationship model is still playing a huge role in child music education, emphasizing too much on the authority of teachers, thereby neglecting children's initiative and invisibly stifling their creativity. The ultimate goal of learning music is to develop and improve children's overall quality instead of using unified training to make every child a professional musician. Many practitioners in China merely tell the Child what to do instead of leading them on a journey to find the joy behind playing the instrument and interpreting a musical work.

Child music education in the United States focuses much more on the individual student itself, although it has its own problems. At the San Francisco Conservatory of Music, there is a course named Teaching Artistry, where faculty and students closely examine different popular pedagogical approaches employed in K-12 music education. Through observations in music classes in a number of public schools in the San Francisco Area, we found that classroom music teachers often employ Orff and Dalcrose methods, both of which are centered around the naturalistic development of children. Students who went through this musical training love the process throughout and generally report satisfaction with such training. Chinese researchers have also concluded that parents in the United States are less likely to punish their kids by any means [1]. Even though tests such as graded music exams also exist in the United States, parents and teachers almost never use it as a tool to pressure children, instead using it as a tool to stimulate children to pursue their own success in such exams. This can be seen in children often having much more latitude on the repertoire they would like to work on instead of their teacher telling them what they should practice and the learning pace that they would like to keep themselves on. The American music education system could mean the overall learning process for children is longer compared to Chinese kids, as teachers often follow the child's pace instead of deciding a pace for the child to follow.

The disparities between the current status of Chinese and American music education systems would certainly have a profound impact on the kids in both countries. While it is always pressuring for kids in China throughout the learning process, they are keen to spend shorter time memorizing a musical work, as they are often forced to prepare for graded exams within a certain period of time, thus leading to better memory in other subject areas and in their life as a whole. The teacher-student relationship in the Chinese music education model limits children's creativity, as most of them would fear asking questions or raising their own ideas, therefore merely following what the teacher instructs them to do, let alone understanding the context behind each specific musical work. Engaging children in musical training at an early age also greatly benefit their language development, a feature that both mega-state's education system feature and a reason to continue promoting music education for children.

5. Final Remarks: Education Policy and Possible Paths Going Forward

In this study, the author has reviewed the past and current features of music education from two of the most powerful global powers, aiming to propose potential solutions and advancement methods to the current education system on child music education, hoping to pace a way to cultivate well-

rounded individuals that are capable of navigating the complexities of society as experienced stakeholders at the highest caliber.

The differences in child music education between China and the United States can be attributed to various factors related to education policies and practices while giving credit to the distinct cultural background of the respective countries. China and the United States possess drastically different educational goals and values in their respective education systems. In China, music education often emphasizes academic and exam results, as stated previously. Teachers in China often lead kids to a unified answer to ensure smooth preparation for music exams. Where in the United States, there is a focus on nurturing creativity, personal development, performance abilities, and overall qualities in students. Students in the United States are often encouraged to ask questions, decide their own learning pace, and choose whatever they would like to work on within a given parameter. This means that for children in the American system, different voices are encouraged, and children are more likely to be playing musical works that they may have a connection to instead of following a disciplined path. There are also disparities in funding allocation between the two mega states. Researchers in China have concluded that the United States prioritizes investment in arts and cultural education, encouraging schools to provide comprehensive arts programs even at the earliest stage. A large amount of public elementary schools, for instance, provide band training, which is a good teamwork experience and gateway for young kids to access formal music training [1]. Whereas in China, the primary focus has always been on foundational academic subjects, arts education receives considerably less funding and emphasis [11]. The emphasis on academic achievement and the pressure to excel in core subjects such as math and science has resulted in a disproportionate allocation of funds towards these areas, sometimes at the expense of arts education [11]. The overall education policy is also essentially different between the two countries. In the United States, school districts have much autonomy in deciding the curriculum locally. However, in China, it is up to the Ministry of Education to decide on such programs, leaving music educators very little room to maneuver. These disparities between the two countries both have a profound impact on child development as they tackle music education very differently.

While recognizing such disparities exist between the two countries, it is important to envision potential problem-solving solutions as it is crucial to provide high-quality music training that would benefit talented young individuals.

First of all, education policies should strike a balance between the importance of academic and arts education, encouraging students' comprehensive development, including music and other art forms. One potential approach is to integrate arts education, including music, into the academic curriculum of core subjects. This can involve incorporating music components into subjects like language arts, history, and science. For example, students can learn about the history of music during specific time periods or explore the physics of sound waves through musical experiments, similar to the course offerings of a professional music conservatory. By integrating music into various subjects, students can develop an appreciation for music while simultaneously engaging with academic content. Schools can also offer a wide range of co-curricular activities that promote music education. This can include establishing school choirs and orchestras and facilitating opportunities for student performances. By providing these activities alongside academic coursework, students have the chance to explore their musical interests and talents while pursuing their academic studies, thus developing their social and emotional skills.

Moreover, the government should prioritize and allocate sufficient funds specifically for arts education, including music education. This can be achieved through budgetary provisions and policy reforms that recognize the importance of arts education in a well-rounded curriculum. At the same time, policymakers should encourage collaboration and resource sharing among schools and music education institutions. By pooling resources, schools can overcome financial constraints and ensure that all students have access to a comprehensive music education curriculum. In fact, in Guangzhou, the Guangzhou Symphony Orchestra, in partnership with the Xinghai Concert Hall, has already initiated programs called "GSO in Campus", where GSO musicians provide periodical performances

in local elementary and secondary schools, coach school ensembles, and provide music lectures. Moreover, the Xinghai Concert Hall also collaborates with local education ministries to provide special performances, lectured and performed by GSO musicians, implemented as part of the local music curriculum. This type of collaboration should be adopted by policymakers as much as possible, and ultimately, achieving a balance between academic and arts education requires a shift in mindset and a comprehensive approach that values the importance of both domains, therefore benefiting child development in all the layers that the author had discussed.

6. Conclusion

In summary, the value of music education has been recognized hundreds of years ago, and with the continuing development of society, music practitioners in both China and the United States keep nurturing children in their distinctive ways. There is not a single right answer to how a perfect music education system could be developed, and the important move forward is to identify the underlying issues among each system in order to foster the physical and mental benefits that music itself would bring. Through reforms in education policy, music education would ultimately benefit all children who have access to it and prepare them to navigate the complex world.

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