

The Case for Compulsory Music Education in U.S. K-12 Schools: A Path to Fostering Cultural Identity and Inclusivity

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Abstract. This paper investigates the possible advantages of having music education as a required part of the U.S. K-12 curricula, particularly relating to how it can help develop cultural identities and encourage social cohesion. Music education helps develop cultural identity in that it creates shared experiences, preserves heritage, and encourages intercultural understanding. Questions of practical implementation—equity disparities, curricular prejudices, and lack of finances—fall into place as some of these challenges. It is contended in the paper that compulsory music education, far from these challenges, has rich cultural and educational rewards and for that matter prescribes remediating through legislative advocacy and public-private partnerships, and culturally responsive teaching practices.

Keywords: Music education; Cultural identity; K-12 curriculum; Social cohesion; Inclusivity.

1. Introduction

Throughout many years in the United States, schooling to music has been valued for its cultivation of creativity, feeling, and social growth. Frequent discussion and debate have perpetually existed if music courses should be obligatory; so, do cultural critics, educators, and policymakers debate the question. The paper argues that obligatory music education is one of the key factors in the processes of developing and forming cultural identity. It is under the conditions of the growing cultural diversity and reorientations in education that a more acute demand to perceive wider social and cultural effects of music education arises.

The COVID-19 pandemic has played further havoc with the funding and staffing of music programs—in 2020, over 77,000 fewer employees were engaged in music education compared to the 2008 financial crisis [1]. This has then provoked further concern for the future of music education, especially now that these programs are being restored and more attention is given to their expansion. For example, in November 2023, leaders from the National Association of Music Merchants (NAMM) made an appearance at Capitol Hill to lobby Congress for full funding of Title IV part A, asking for \$1.65 billion to be spared for the cause of music and arts programs [2]. This, with all such efforts, hurt many schools that went on to actually eliminate a bundle of compulsory and elective music classes claiming financial limitations.

In the context of the economic aspects, the value of music education will be discussed as integral to the formation of cultural identity. Cultural identity, for the purpose of this study, means a person's orientation regarding himself to features that are shared by a cultural group in society, such as characteristics, and common traditional values [3]. The music education is believed to enhance cultural identity through cultivating affinity, preserving culture, and promoting social unity based on shared music experiences [4]. The paper addresses the possibility of compulsory music education enhancing cultural identity and also deals with problems such as financing and possible bias of curricula.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Background

2.1. Cultural Identity and the Role of Music Education

The concept of cultural identity is at the heart of any discussion concerning compulsory music education. In this paper, cultural identity refers to how an individual views him or herself in relation to the groups, with common traditions, values, and symbols [3]. Music, being one of the most potent cultural expressions, significantly influences the formation and maintenance of cultural identity [4]. Smolicz defines cultural identity as something often created and maintained through the concordance of core cultural values; music plays a major role in this regard because of its powerful evocation of feelings of togetherness and emotional bonds as well as group solidarity [5].

Music learning perpetuates onto cultural identity formation by generating feelings of shared heritage and social membership. As per the views of Green in his research, music education is an effective tool for the inculcation of cultural values and group identity through shared musical experiences, particularly in the setting of formal schooling [4]. These findings are closely related to the perspective of Hargreaves and Nigel, who believe that music taught from an early age in a formalized way makes one keener on cultural norms and a liker of their culture than the music they produce [3]. Music teaching enables the child to come into contact with the cultural context from which music emerges and as a result reinforces identification in wider social contexts.

2.2. Impact of National Anthems and Collective Musical Experiences

Among the most direct examples to assert the deep effects of music education on cultural identity are the singing of national anthems. According to Cerulo, national anthems are very powerful symbols of national unity and identity; this perfectly fits the concept that could be delivered and inculcated through music education [6]. Singing the national anthem is done in most K-12 schools and provides a clear physical manifestation and sound of patriotism and cultural identity. According to the findings discussed by Slater et al., there is a direct relationship in the UEFA Euro 2016 tournament between the performance on-field results and the manner in which the national anthems were sung [7]. The more emphatically national anthems were sung by giving a better response, better on-field performances were produced. This would have enabled actual games to be used in analyzing qualitative on-field performances.

Still, the specific pathways through which music education nurtures cultural identity remain largely obscure. Although works such as that of Slater et al. are strong quantitative evidence, there needs to be further investigation into the pedagogical methods that most successfully bring about the formation of cultural identity through music. That implies that mandatory music education could, if set up right, have extended benefits for cultural cohesion and identity development.

2.3. Long-Term Impact of Music Education on Cultural Identity

Lamont explored how music learning helps cultural identity [8]. The author surveyed 530 amateur adult musicians and found that long-term participation in music-making had a significant effect on self-perception and cultural engagement. This study is evidence against what is often termed the 'talent myth', showing that musical ability is not some inherent quality born in an individual but something that can be developed by training. This result implies that compulsory music education can make students more culturally identified by giving them, throughout life, prolonged access to music experiences.

One limitation of Lamont's study is that the focus is on adult musicians rather than K-12 students. Questions about generalizability to younger populations would therefore seem justifiable. Still, this work testifies to the long-term benefits of music education and its role in enhancing cultural identity formation. In other words, if music education were integrated into the K-12 curricula as obligatory coursework, then students would better come to form their cultural identities—thus, the rest of their lives engaging with their heritages.

2.4. Music Education and Cultural Diversity

Another important aspect of music education is the contribution to cultural diversity. When music education considers multiculturalism, Villodre notes that it would open ways for students to come in contact with various traditions and cultures [9]. For instance, comparing the music that students make from various nursery rhymes across different cultures, their attention is drawn to the unity in diversity of cultural expressions. It will enhance the self-identity and value personal culture, and at the same time, foster cross-cultural competences, which will further enhance the social cohesion in multi-ethnic societies.

Ilari et al., further noted that music education is one way of embracing and keeping the cultural heritage, especially that which emanates from the kind of ethnic musical traditions that may be lost in the world of globalization [10]. Engagement with music from other cultures will give the students respect for the stories in cultures that are different from theirs and, in turn, make a contribution to their own cultural identity and diversity.

3. Expanded Practical Implications of Compulsory Music Education

3.1. Funding Challenges

The first and foremost barrier to implementing compulsory music education is finding enough money to pay for it. Since music education requires a lot of resources to provide instruments, classroom materials, and trained educators, cuts to music programs can be very tempting from a monetary standpoint. As Jeres notes, the total number of employees working for music programs in K-12 schools plunged by 77,000 between 2008 and 2020; this was more specifically due to the deficit in budgets subsequent to not only the 2008 economic crisis but also the COVID-19 pandemic [1]. Especially for public schools with meager assets, the administrators often have to decide on choices that are very hard about how the resources should be spent. As they attend to more pressure because of scarce resources, they are likely to choose tested subjects like mathematics and reading over rich music programs.

As a result, disparities across districts are another source that cripples the musical programs. In higher-income areas can afford to keep their programs and might even add more, schools from low-income areas need to cut music education totally. Thus, there is a two-tier system created: the possibility to have music education, therefore the cultural and cognitive circumstances stemming from it, is cast in terms of the causative agent's socioeconomic status. Apart from deepening the disparities in education, absence of regular funding for music inflicts a blow on the developmental role belonging to music education in the formation of culture and cohesion in a society.

3.2. Legislative Advocacy and Funding Solutions

Beyond the difficulties, there have been efforts to restore funding for music education. In 2023, the National Association of Music Merchants initiated a campaign to lobby Congress for \$1.65 billion in Title IV, Part A funding for music and arts programs in public schools [2]. An initiative such as this would suggest that there is a recent realization concerning the value of music education, not only because of its worth as art but also in consideration of its contribution to the complete developmental processes of students. Even if this funding is approved by Congress, equally pressing will be ensuring that it reaches all schools equitably.

One way to resolve the funding problem might be through an arrangement in the form of a public-private partnership. Local musicians, community organizations, and arts organizations could work with schools to generate additional supplemental music programming. For instance, local musicians could run after-school programs or weekend workshops to relieve some of the resource constraints that schools have to bear. Schools might also be able to include music education in their applications to cultural foundations and arts councils for grants to help defray the costs. Though not a solution that

trenches on full negation of a need for such funds, it does lift some of the burden, allowing more students access to music education.

3.3. Integration into the K-12 Curriculum

The other major barrier is more of a practical challenge of fitting compulsory music education into schools' already tight schedules. In many schools—especially those that already have more than enough to cope with—there simply is not room for more music lessons. Compulsory music would probably have to displace time from other subjects, and there would be obvious objections from the teaching and administrative staffs to take time away from math, science, or language arts.

An alternative approach would be to merge music with other subjects, ensuring that the resultant lessons fulfill more than one educational need. Music should then be employed to teach or bring out themes about mathematics, for example, fractions and ratios, and a topic in history, based on a given period's music. Through this way, therefore, it does not only support putting music education into the school day but also reinstates why music is important as a tool in general academic learning.

On a further note, schools could, in their initial phase, introduce mandatory music education in the lower grades, wherein a higher level of feasibility is generally observed. This gradual process enables schools to slowly enhance their capacity—both in staffing and resourcing—while not causing a serious dislocation of the existing curricula. In the long run, after the schools have equipped themselves with designs for various facilities, programs of music education could be extended to higher grades to provide all students with sustained musical instruction.

4. Expanded Bias and Inclusivity in Music Education

4.1. Racial, Class, and Gender Biases in Curricula

Bias within curricula of music education is one concern that has mostly passed under the radar; however, it has started to gain more attention of late. According to Morton, research on music education perpetuates the in-trend clichés that propagate stereotypes and marginalize certain groups regarding race, class, and gender [11]. For example, in her analysis of the Canadian production *Anne of Green Gables—The Musical*, she notes that the Indigenous representations were not merely stereotypical but also offensive as non-Natives wrote the Native characters to embody the savage Indian and noble Indian dichotomy that sustains damaging colonial myths. However, such biases transcend Canada to spread across most Western music curricula, giving weight to the European classical tradition at the expense of tremendous contributions of musicality to the world by non-Western cultures.

For several reasons, this is problematic. First, it shuts out the cultural heritages of the students from diverse backgrounds, which might reflect the students' own cultural orientations at the end of learning. In so doing, this act raises questions regarding the “whys” some musical combos are limited to only being Eurocentric. It questions whether Western classical music is a “gold standard,” while others may be regarded as “not as good” or “not as important.” This has the capacity not only to ingrain cultural hierarchies but also to limit the exposure of students to the vast diversity of music around the world.

The antidote to such biases lies in the necessity for educators to create a more inclusive curriculum for the teaching of music. This could involve widening the repertoire to encompass many diversities of cultural musics—African, Latin American, Asian, and Indigenous peoples, to name a few. Thus, schools will be better placed to help their students comprehend the concept of music holistically as a global force and at the same time instill some appreciation for different cultures through their music. Educators must also receive in-service training to appreciate and challenge their biases that they may not consciously use to pass on stereotypes in teaching.

4.2. Cultural Bias in Music Assessments

The bias issue, however, goes beyond the curriculum to the very assessments used in measuring students' musical abilities. As Kruse explains, differential item functioning is a statistical tool that points to the possibility of bias in tests [12]. It means differential item functioning (DIF) arises if, for example, students with similar overall abilities but differing culturally still score differently on particular items in a test. Some music assessments are thus confirmed to be culturally biased, predisposing, for instance, western-traditioned students to better marks while concurrently barring their counterparts who come from other cultural traditions with their music experiences there.

For instance, a test in music theory with the notation of the West might be difficult for those students to pass who come from oral traditions of music learning, which is widespread in many African, Indigenous, and Asian cultures. Performance assessments that claim mastery in playing Western instruments like the piano and the violin tend to undermine talented students playing non-Western instruments such as the djembe and sitar. In this way, biases influence not only students' test scores but also how they come to feel about themselves in terms of competence and being musicians.

In response to this, music educators and policymakers should begin working on more culturally conscious assessments. This might include developing tests that value aspects of musicianship such as the ability to improvise, oral tradition, and the ability to play non-Western instruments. Also, due consideration of the circumstances under which the students are taking music culturally should be considered and the assessment environment should be made more inclusive and equitable.

4.3. Gender Dynamics in Music Participation

Addressing the gender biases in music education is also important. Research has shown that the choice of instruments and musical activities in general categories is just sexist. More generally, boys tend to be encouraged to play brass and percussion instruments, while girls are steered toward string instruments or singing [13]. Such gendered expectations may provide an impingement over the students' minds in the form of restrictions with complete reinforcement of their set gender roles and, thereby, do not allow boys and girls in equal measure to exploit their potentials in music fully.

For instance, this discourages boys who are interested in singing or playing the flute because the boys are not supposed to do "feminine" things, while it may keep girls who want to drum or play the trombone out of the same pursuit. Such stereotypes limit not only what students may come up with for musical expression but also help keep gender inequity alive in the real music world since women are few and far between doing a lot of things, i.e., composing, conducting.

Music educators should welcome and challenge gender norms in the music education environment, encouraging all students to become involved in making music and trying out a wide range of instruments and musical activities. Thus, opportunities could be created for students to have a trial period with some instruments in an environment that is low pressure and does not bear down on students to exemplify traditional gender norms. Furthermore, music educators should have professional development in which they acknowledge and address their implicit biases concerning gender and the choice of the instrument so that their guidance to the students focuses on decision-making according to interest and aptitude, and not social pressure.

5. Expanded Challenges in Music Education

5.1. Subject Prioritization in Schools

Music education is plagued with problems such as course prioritization in the K-12 curriculum. Updating quality performance in STEM courses has marginalized music and arts programs. Instructors still perceive music, in most cases alongside the majority of the policymakers, as a subject of "luxury" that can be forgone in favor of those directly related to the academic success of the students and readiness to join college [1].

It is really to endorse for this view because one speaks to impute the realization of the cognitive and social benefits of teaching music. Already the potential cognitive benefits of music education, it can only serve to reiterate the contribution to already positive developments in creativity and social-emotional learning of an integrated approach to learning inside the classroom. For example, Schellenberg determined that those students receiving musical instruction reported higher IQ scores than those who did not [14]. Just as these findings assert that music education is not a mere co-curriculum venture but an integral part of all aspects of cognitive and affective growth that may work better for learners in quite a range of school subjects.

5.2. Misconceptions About Music Education

This view results from misconceptions about the cognitive and social benefits accruing to music education. As Jeres observes, "Music programs are often the first to be cut in low-income areas where resources are already stretched thin and there is less awareness of the broader benefits of music education" [1]. Indeed, research has proven that music education has positive effects on students' development regarding cognition, creativity, and social-emotional learning; therefore, it constitutes a core subject in the curriculum of studies [14].

5.3. Shortage of Trained Music Educators

Moreover, one major problem, in fact, is the insufficient number of qualified music trainers, mainly in rural and less developed places. Many schools have difficulties in recruiting as well as keeping the right quality of music instructors, plus most of the teacher-education training programs do not put much emphasis on music. This culminates in a vicissitude whereby the schools are unable to offer superior music programs and further demoralize the students from pursuing music education.

5.4. Solutions to Overcome Challenges

A push for making music a core subject on the K-12 curriculum is obviously going to be an enormous challenge. It would involve securing proper funding, expanding teacher education programs, and encouraging partnerships with local arts organizations. Such efforts would free schools from their resource constraints to assure all students the right of access to the benefits of compulsory music education.

6. Conclusion

Mandatory music education within the U.S. K-12 system is something necessary to nurture cultural identity and preserve heritage while enhancing social cohesion. Music education leads to belonging and infused diversity appreciation from the culture through shared experiences by the students. The imbalances due to practical problems are such that adequacy of funds and curricular biases should be ensured for music education to be accessible to all on an equal basis.

To surmount these obstacles, increased financing through legislative lobbying and public-private partnerships, alongside the development of culturally responsive curricula, will be needed. Educators have to make it a point to be inclusive and do away with biases in music teaching and assessment so that all learners will engage with a wide array of traditions.

In a nutshell, the cultural and educational benefits of compulsory music education far outweigh the challenges. Implying that music is integrated into the core curriculum of schools may go a long way in molding very strong cultural identities and fostering a togetherness that is more inclusive.

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