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MUSIC EDUCATION IN A MULTICULTURAL CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on analyzing the role and significance of music education in a multicultural classroom environment, while also identifying the challenges and opportunities faced by both music teachers and students. In the context of increasing globalization and migration, multicultural classrooms have become more common, requiring music education to adapt to the diversity of languages, cultures, and values. The article highlights key challenges, including language barriers, differences in musical aesthetic perceptions, and difficulties in selecting instructional content that is appropriate for various cultural backgrounds. At the same time, the article also clarifies the opportunities that music education can bring, such as fostering mutual respect, developing critical thinking, and promoting creativity. The research results propose specific solutions aimed at improving the quality of teaching and learning music in multicultural environments, contributing to the holistic development of learners

KEYWORDS: music, classroom, environment, challenges, opportunities

INTRODUCTION

In the context of increasing globalization and deeper international integration, today's classrooms are becoming more and more culturally diverse. Students from different regions, ethnic groups, and social backgrounds come together in a shared learning environment, creating a richness of identity and experience. In such an educational setting, music education is not merely an artistic subject, but also a vital medium for connection, communication, and the celebration of cultural differences among students. Music has the power to transcend language barriers, convey emotions, and build bridges between communities, contributing to a more open, cohesive, and humane learning environment.

However, teaching music in a multicultural classroom also presents numerous challenges. Teachers must deal with differences in musical preferences, cultural value systems, students' levels of receptiveness, and a lack of culturally inclusive teaching materials. Furthermore, many current music curricula remain heavily focused on certain genres, lacking inclusivity and fairness toward the music traditions of various ethnic groups. This may unintentionally reduce students' engagement in learning if they do not see their own cultural identity reflected in the curriculum.

Given these realities, researching and identifying opportunities and solutions to improve the effectiveness of music education in multicultural settings is essential. This article focuses on analyzing the challenges and opportunities in teaching music in multicultural classrooms, while also proposing several pedagogical directions to help music teachers build appropriate, equitable, and effective teaching strategies. In doing so, music education can contribute not only to the development of artistic competencies but also to nurturing tolerance and respect for diversity—qualities that are essential in today's multicultural society.

2. CONTENT

2.1. Theoretical issues in music education and multicultural classrooms

2.1.1. *Theoretical issues in music education*

Multicultural education is understood as an approach aimed at fostering understanding, respect, and acceptance of cultural differences throughout the teaching and learning process. According to Banks (2006), multicultural education not only involves teaching about cultural diversity but also concerns how the classroom is organized, how the curriculum is developed, and the instructional strategies used to meet the needs of all learners regardless of their cultural backgrounds [1].

In the field of music education, integrating multicultural perspectives plays a vital role in nurturing global thinking and empathy among individuals from different contexts. Campbell (2004) emphasized that music is a “gateway” to accessing other cultures, as through music, students can experience the symbols, emotions, and traditions of communities that may be unfamiliar to them [2]. Similarly, Volk (1998) argued that multicultural music education helps learners broaden their perspectives, avoid prejudice, and encourages creativity in musical perception and expression [3].

Additionally, the theory of Understanding by Design developed by Wiggins and McTighe (2005) has been effectively applied in the development of multicultural music curricula. This method emphasizes backward design, meaning it starts with the desired end goals (such as deep understanding and diverse expressive abilities) and then builds learning content and activities accordingly [4].

2.1.2. *The Vietnamese context and the need for innovation in music education*

In Vietnam, the multicultural nature of classrooms is particularly evident in areas with a high concentration of ethnic minority groups. According to Nguyen Thi My Loc (2016), multicultural education in Vietnam presents both challenges and opportunities, as the general education system still lacks the flexibility needed to adapt to the regional and ethnic diversity across the country [5].

Music, characterized by its expressive nature and deep cultural identity, holds great potential as a tool for multicultural education. Nguyen Thi Nhung (2020) suggested that folk music and traditional ethnic music should be included in the school curriculum to foster cultural pride. At the same time, expanding access to world music is important to enhance students' multicultural understanding [6].

Moreover, Vietnam's Ministry of Education and Training (2018), in its comprehensive general education curriculum, emphasized the development of aesthetic capacity, as well as the ability to

perceive and creatively express art, as part of the goals for holistic education. This creates opportunities to design music programs that integrate multicultural elements, enrich content, and apply flexible teaching methods.

2.1.3. The role of teachers and appropriate teaching methods

To effectively implement music education in a multicultural classroom, teachers must be equipped with intercultural pedagogical competencies. Killen (2006) emphasized that teachers should be sensitive to cultural differences within the classroom, be capable of selecting music content that represents a variety of cultures, and create an open learning environment that encourages dialogue and mutual respect [7].

In practical teaching, project-based learning (PBL) is one of the most appropriate approaches for organizing multicultural music activities. According to Thomas (2000), PBL enables students to access knowledge in an active, collaborative manner, through real-world exploration and interdisciplinary connections [8]. When applied to music education, students can engage in projects such as researching ethnic music, recreating traditional festivals, or comparing musical instruments from different regions—thereby developing multicultural understanding naturally and sustainably.

In Vietnam, some studies, such as those by Dinh Quang Bao (2014) and Nguyen Van Hung (2020), have also recommended applying integrated teaching methods and project-based learning in primary music education. These approaches not only develop students' musical skills but also foster positive attitudes toward cultural diversity [9][10].

2.1.4. Classroom environment and community involvement

An essential element in the theory of multicultural music education is the role of the learning environment. Nieto (2010) argued that the classroom should become a “multi-voiced” space, where students can express their cultural identities and listen to the stories of others [11].

In the Vietnamese context, researchers such as Le Anh Tuan (2015) have also emphasized the role of the community and parents in building a multicultural music environment—highlighting that they are the ones who pass down traditional musical values to younger generations [12].

2.2. Challenges and opportunities of music education in a multicultural classroom environment

In the context of globalization, cultural exchanges have become increasingly common, particularly in the field of education. A multicultural classroom not only reflects diversity in ethnicity, language, and beliefs but also embodies a richness in approaches to knowledge and the arts—including music. Music education in a multicultural classroom is not merely about delivering musical knowledge; it also presents an opportunity to cultivate understanding, respect, and cultural integration among students.

However, teachers also face significant challenges in organizing and delivering music instruction. These include navigating differences in students' cultural backgrounds, musical preferences, and prior

exposure to music, as well as the lack of inclusive teaching materials that represent a wide spectrum of musical traditions.

2.2.1. Challenges of music education in multicultural classrooms

Firstly, cultural differences can create barriers in selecting teaching content. In a classroom where students come from various countries, regions, or ethnic groups, choosing a piece of music or musical genre that suits all students is not an easy task. A folk song from the Kinh people may be unfamiliar to Hmong students, and vice versa. If not approached carefully, teachers may unintentionally make students feel excluded or that their own cultural background is being undervalued.

For example, in classes at Tan Trao University, where students come from a variety of ethnic backgrounds, music teaching requires sensitivity and a deep understanding of cultural diversity.

One of the major challenges in music education is the disparity in students' musical and cultural backgrounds. For instance, in a primary school in the mountainous region of northern Vietnam, a teacher may choose a folk song from the Red River Delta to teach. However, some Dao students might feel disconnected from the song because they do not understand the lyrics or recognize the melody. This highlights the need to select more inclusive, accessible, and culturally familiar songs for all students in the classroom. Choosing songs that reflect local ethnic identities helps students feel more engaged and better absorb the lesson content.

Another challenge is the difference in learning styles and approaches to music among students from different cultural backgrounds. Students at Tan Trao University- whether Kinh, Tay, Nung, Hmong, Dao, Cao Lan, or Pa Then - each have distinct relationships with their own traditional music, which can influence how they engage with music in the classroom.

However, the multicultural classroom environment also offers many opportunities. First, teaching music in such a setting can help students develop the ability to listen to and respect diverse cultural values. Sharing music from different cultures can broaden students' perspectives and deepen their understanding of the world around them. Moreover, teachers can encourage students to be creative and express themselves through music, thereby enriching the learning environment.

Another example from Tan Trao University classrooms is when teachers organize small music performances where students from different ethnic groups can showcase traditional songs from their own culture. These events not only provide opportunities for students to demonstrate their talents but also serve as moments for cultural exchange and mutual understanding. Through these performances, students can learn from one another and discover the unique musical elements of each culture.

Secondly, language barriers present significant difficulties. Many songs are taught in the national language (Vietnamese) or in foreign languages, which can be difficult for students who are not yet fluent in those languages. Additionally, musical concepts such as rhythm, melody, and tempo may be expressed differently depending on the cultural context.

For example, in a folk music class, a teacher might choose a Vietnamese song to teach. However, for some students from the Tay ethnic group, Vietnamese is not their first language, and they struggle to understand the lyrics. The song may contain unfamiliar words and use musical terms like rhythm, melody, and tempo that the students are not used to.

Furthermore, when the teacher explains rhythm and melody, Tay students may feel confused because, in their own musical tradition, these concepts might be understood and expressed differently. For example, in Tay folk music, rhythm and tempo might not follow the standardized patterns of Western music, making it difficult for students to transfer these concepts to Vietnamese or Western music.

Thus, language barriers affect not only the understanding of lyrics but also the absorption of technical musical concepts, making music teaching more challenging for students who are not proficient in the language of instruction.

Thirdly, music teachers need to have a broad understanding of different cultures, but in reality, not all teachers are formally trained to handle multicultural situations in the classroom. This highlights the need to enhance multicultural pedagogical competencies among educators.

2.2.2. Opportunities from music education in multicultural classrooms

Despite many challenges, multicultural classrooms also present valuable opportunities in music education.

Firstly, they provide a chance for students to be exposed to and understand diverse musical traditions, thereby developing comprehensive musical thinking and multidimensional artistic appreciation. Music has the power to connect people beyond language and cultural barriers, helping students learn to listen, understand, and empathize.

For example, in a music activity at a primary school in Tan Trao, students majoring in Primary Education from Tan Trao University were tasked with organizing a multicultural music performance for children. In this session, Tay, Dao, and Kinh students performed their traditional songs in both Vietnamese and their ethnic languages. The university students guided the children to combine songs from different ethnic groups, helping them understand and appreciate each other's cultures. This program not only enhanced musical learning but also facilitated cultural exchange through music, allowing the children to experience the richness and diversity of their classroom environment.

Secondly, music education in a multicultural setting is an effective tool for developing soft skills such as collaboration, creativity, and problem-solving. When students learn and perform music from various cultures together, they are encouraged to share, communicate, and find common ground. This process fosters teamwork and intercultural communication skills.

Thirdly, teachers have the opportunity to innovate their teaching methods. Designing multicultural music projects such as composing songs, performing ethnic musical instruments, or organizing music

festivals not only makes lessons more engaging but also sparks students' enthusiasm for learning. At the same time, teachers can integrate content from other subjects such as history, geography, and ethics into music lessons to provide a more holistic education.

2.3. Suggestions for Enhancing the Effectiveness of Music Education in Multicultural Classrooms

To maximize opportunities and minimize challenges, teachers should implement several specific strategies.

Firstly, it is essential to develop a music curriculum that integrates multicultural elements, offering a diverse selection of musical genres, including folk music, classical music, and contemporary music from various ethnic groups both within and outside the country.

Secondly, teachers should encourage student participation in designing learning activities. For example, each student group could be assigned to research and present a song that represents their culture. These activities can then culminate in a multicultural music performance or competition, creating a dynamic and inclusive learning experience.

Thirdly, teachers need to regularly enhance their knowledge and pedagogical skills in multicultural education, and learn from international practices in music teaching within the context of globalization. Teacher training programs should focus on improving the ability to manage culturally inclusive classrooms and to effectively address issues that arise during teaching.

In summary, music education in multicultural classrooms presents both challenges and opportunities for building a humanistic, liberal, and holistic education. Effective music teaching in such environments requires not only professional competence but also cultural sensitivity and creativity in instructional methods. If approached appropriately, music can become a lasting bridge between cultures, contributing to the creation of a learning community that is rich in identity, tolerance, and unity.

3. CONCLUSION

Music education in multicultural classrooms presents numerous challenges, yet it also offers rich opportunities for growth. Although factors such as language differences, cultural diversity, and students' musical habits can pose barriers to accessing and teaching music, these very elements also serve as opportunities for teachers to demonstrate creativity and adaptability in selecting and designing lesson content. Applying music education methods tailored to each student group helps create an inclusive learning environment where every student can experience and express their unique cultural identity.

The opportunities that music education brings in multicultural settings are significant - from developing language and communication skills to fostering understanding and respect for different cultures. For example, multicultural music performances, such as the event organized by Tan Trao

University students at a local primary school, not only introduced students to music but also created valuable chances for cultural exchange, learning, and the development of empathy and mutual respect.

Looking ahead, teachers should make the most of these opportunities by creating diverse, engaging, and flexible music activities that are culturally relevant to their students. This will contribute to shaping a music education that is both creative and humanistic in today's multicultural society.

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