

Comparative Study of Popular Music in China and the United States

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Abstract:

Music provides numerous benefits for students of all ages, ranging from children to teenagers. As popular music continues to emerge and evolve rapidly, it has become a daily activity for many students around the world. However, popular music pedagogies often lack professionalism and direction. This article highlights the significance of popular music education, describes the limitations of popular music education in the two countries, outlines mainstream suggestions for incorporating popular music education in schools, and compares the two countries' popular music educational systems. Through research results, it is found that while the two countries' popular music education differs in stipulated instructional hours and is confronted with distinct attitudes from teachers and scholars, they share similarities, such as a high demand for teachers, curricula offerings differing from students' music of interest, and a disparity between schools. This comparative study sheds light on the similarities and differences of popular music education in the two countries and may provide guidance for improving the popular music educational systems.

Keywords: Popular music education; China; United States; school; comparative study

1. Introduction

It has long been discussed that music benefits students in four categories: success in school, society, intellectual development, and overall life [1]. Learning music early in life provides benefits from school readiness to lifelong development and skills. As the music of the students, popular music education in schools encompasses classes and courses that cover popular music studies, performance, songwriting, and music technology production [2]. Popular music education has been introduced into schools in Chi-

na since the 1990s [3]. While schools in the United States have integrated music classes from the beginning, it was only formally acknowledged in the Tanglewood Declaration of 1968 [4]. This article aims to identify the significance of popular music education, describe the current state of popular music education in China and the United States, and propose suggestions for enhancing popular music education in both countries. Additionally, it will compare the two educational systems' similarities and differences, focusing on popular music education in K-12 schools.

2. Significance of Popular Music Education

The significance of music education is widely discussed in literatures. Essentially, it practices skills that can be transferred to other activities that use similar processes [5]. For example, engaging in musical activities requires fine-motor coordination and rhythmic coordination and increases phonemic awareness, which is beneficial for language development, literacy skills, and reading skills. Spatial-temporal reasoning and numerical reasoning are also applied in the process of music engagement, which strengthens one's mathematical performance. Apart from specific learning transfers, music also enhances memory, creativity, critical thinking, intellectual development, and positive self-perceptions, which can impact one's motivation levels. Personal and social development, such as the understanding of the normality of feelings and the significance of expressions, and the learning of being sensitive, appreciative, and positive to others' feelings, is also bolstered through engagement in musical activities [5].

As popular music aligns more closely with students' daily lives, it provides more social and economic benefits to students than general music education does. Popular music is significant both individually and collectively [2]. As students enjoy popular music, it may attract them and build a foundation for their further exploration of music. As its lyrics are closer to students' daily lives, popular music may resonate more with students. Learning about popular music from different countries allows students to engage in transcultural music cultures and understand current music trends [6]. Seeking inspiration from popular music and attempting to create something of their own enhances their creativity and imagination, serving as a means of self-expression and emotional relief. Some additional benefits of popular music education include leisure, entrepreneurship, and self-discovery. The genre offers opportunities for discussions about diverse ethnicities, ideologies, religions, and sexual identities [2].

However, many of the positive influences of music only occur when engagement is enjoyable and rewarding. Popular music can motivate students to participate in school programs and explore various music styles, but achieving this positive result requires thoughtful implementation. Thus, the guidance of engagement with music in one's childhood, mostly provided by the education of popular music in school, is crucial.

3. Limitations of Popular Music Education in Respective Countries

3.1 Limitations of Popular Music Education in China

China's national curriculum standard stipulates that music

classes consist of 4.5% to 5.5% of the whole class hours. There are approximately 480 music classes at the end of middle school, and music class remains a compulsory course even in high school. However, a common phenomenon is that students seem to be in a cycle of starting from scratch in terms of musical knowledge with every new level of education [7].

First, China's education treats music as a complementary subject. China has an exam-oriented educational system that puts a heavy focus on the national college entrance exam, which consists of six subjects: Chinese, Mathematics, a foreign language, and three out of six selectable subjects (History, Physics, Politics, Geography, Chemistry, and Biology). As music is not among these subjects, it is often disregarded, especially in high school. Schools do not attach importance to popular music education, and students esteem music class as entertainment [8]. The oversight of music education is also evident in that schools often lack professionally required facilities and resources for music learning, and the absence of music education in many schools in rural areas.

Next, most music educators in China have a negative attitude towards popular music and believe it will harm children. This is the case for many music teachers, who often lack a deep understanding of popular music and may even harbor prejudices against it. Due to this lack of awareness, they fail to select learning content based on children's interests. Teaching materials in China's music lessons typically consist of traditional Chinese music, classical music, and folk music from other countries. The impact of using materials that do not match students' interests is that students may even develop an aversion towards traditional music [9]. Although the 2022 edition of "Compulsory Education Art Curriculum Standards" highlighted the importance of popular music in middle school music education, textbooks offer a limited selection of popular songs, many of which are outdated and have low learning requirements. Furthermore, music teachers in Chinese schools usually have a background in traditional or classical music, which makes it hard for popular music to be taught well [9].

Challenges are also posed to China's music education, as teachers are required to combine education of popular music and traditional music, which the curriculum standard demands. Teachers also need to update their knowledge on popular music frequently, as it changes rapidly. Additionally, certain popular music may overtly emphasize the song's catchiness and use simple music theory, which does not help students' accomplishments. Students may have strong preferences and responses for certain popular music, which makes it hard to maintain classroom discipline [6].

3.2 Limitations of Popular Music Education in the United States

Popular music education in the United States also encoun-

tered similar adversities to those in China. For example, due to the “popular” nature of the subject, implementing popular music education as a curriculum is challenging, as curricula vary widely between regions and become outdated quickly. Additionally, the music offerings at school are often disconnected from students’ musical lives outside of school and their interests and needs. The curricular offerings in school music education programs tend towards classical, folk, and jazz, which are not popular music that students listen to daily. A result of this phenomenon is the continuing decline in students’ support and participation in school music, as the state of involvement in large music ensembles in US schools was estimated to be fewer than 20% of the total secondary school student population [10]. Although still increasing, the average rate of students consistently enrolled in music classes was 34% from 1982 to 2009 [11]. Disparity also exists in popular music education in the United States. In a 2019 survey, it was revealed that while 92% of public-school students have access to music education, more than 3.6 million students do not have access to any arts education, especially in schools located in major urban or very rural areas where most kids are black, Hispanic, or native American [12]. Instructional time decreased, and a national shortage of music teachers had reached crisis proportions. Until 2022, the rigid teaching schedule remained a prohibitive factor in implementing popular music curricula in schools [13].

However, popular music education in the United States is undergoing significant evolution. This is grounded by the Tanglewood declaration, which augmented the inclusivity of popular music education in the curriculum by stating that “Music of all periods, styles, forms, and cultures belongs in the curriculum. The musical repertory should be expanded to involve music of our time in its rich variety, including currently popular teenage music and avant-garde music, American folk music, and the music of other cultures” [4]. The decreasing student participation rates and students’ support of popular music curriculum in schools are also driving factors for incorporating popular music education in schools [13]. Additionally, Matthew Clauhs’s 2022 study suggests that the majority of music teachers strongly support popular music education, implying that music teachers and scholars in the US might commit to including popular music education as part of the curriculum and identifying the best practices for students’ engagement in the future [13].

The recent establishment of various professional organizations in the United States dedicated to promoting popular music education illustrates increased support for popular music. Two examples are the Association of Popular Music Education (APME) and Music Will, which helped bring popular music into an increasing number of classrooms. The APME supports the connection between the music classroom and the stage, and its Journal of Popular Music Education (JPME) seeks to define and disseminate

practices and discourse around popular music education [14]. Music Will aided popular music education in the United States’ public school system by providing teacher training, curriculum, resources, and instruments. They had served more than 1.8 million students in 6000 schools since its inception [15].

4. Suggestions for Popular Music Education in Respective Countries

4.1 Suggestions for Popular Music Education in China

Many Chinese scholars, such as Chen Shilong, Li Guozhong, and Li Pengxun, have suggested implications of popular music education in K-12 education [6, 9, 16]. Before music class, teachers can conduct surveys or questionnaires to understand students’ preferences better and adjust teaching content accordingly [16]. Teachers should choose popular music that matches the class content and has educational significance, such as music with specific ideological and artistic values that align with students’ mental features [6, 9].

When preparing for the class, teachers need to acknowledge popular music correctly by researching the music thoroughly [9]. Teaching content should be precise, inter-linked, and attention-catching to keep students engaged. Teachers should also presuppose students’ classroom attitudes and behaviors when learning and prepare ways to monitor and maintain the classroom discipline [16].

In the teaching content, a deep analysis of the musical elements and music theory behind the music should be included so that students learn about the musical theoretical knowledge. The context of the music, its societal meaning, and cultural significance should also be educated. The teacher should also enrich their instructional methods beyond lectures, encouraging students to engage in music composition and performance [9].

To address the regionalism and timeliness features of popular music, schools can organize regular teacher training sessions. This could involve inviting experts in popular music or popular music education to deliver lectures or workshops, as well as participating in popular music-related academic conferences and seminars. The school should provide vital educational facilities and resources, and teachers could utilize internet resources to enhance teaching quality [16].

4.2 Suggestions for Popular Music Education in the United States

Due to the declining rate of student enrollment in music classes, many scholars have called for the popular education system in the United States to be reformed. Below are some suggestions scholars have made.

First, a different instructional mode should be used. Williams suggested employing smaller classes, promoting student-centered learning, creative decision making, and aural development, and incorporating technology into the music classroom [17].

Second, teaching content should be altered. The curriculum of popular music education should be more student-centered [18]. Teachers should listen and understand the students to value and validate students' diverse music cultures. Then, curriculum choices should be made accordingly and locally for each group of students

Third, provide a teacher training program. Teachers should be adept at ethnographic research and curriculum design, and the integration of contemporary popular music practices. Moreover, in the USA, music teachers need to be well versed in technology, transcribing, arranging, and a wide variety of music that is reflective of the Americas [10].

5. Comparison of Popular Music Education in China and the United States

5.1 Similarities

Due to the commercial and pervasive nature of popular music, the curricula of popular music vary between regions and update rapidly. This is because every region has its own cultural background that shapes one's cultural capital and habitus, influencing their musical tastes and the types of songs people in that region enjoy more. Meanwhile, artists are constantly creating new things that align with their current preferences and innovate to gain popularity. This quality of popular music imposes a high demand on teachers, as they must understand the diverse musical styles in different regions and continually learn new information to update their teaching materials accordingly.

Both countries have explicitly stated that popular music should be included in the curricula. Nevertheless, curricula offerings differ from what children listen to outside of school, and both consist of classical, folk music, and music unique to the country —traditional Chinese music for China and jazz music for the United States. Besides, many music teachers in both China and the United States may have focused on studying pedagogies for genres other than popular music. Similarly, they may possess musical skills for instruments other than those typically used in popular music. The incoherence of previous skills and experiences with popular music may become an obstacle for some teachers to implement popular music education well in classrooms.

A disparity exists between schools' accessibility to popular music education based on their students' socioeconomic status and ethnicities [19]. This inequality primarily stems from unequal funding, resulting in disparities in

access to resources. However, this disparity in access to music education may impact students' abilities in various fields and further exacerbate inequality.

5.2 Differences

The distinct attitudes on popular music education are the most prominent difference in popular music education in the two countries. Scholars and music teachers in the United States have a much more positive view of popular music education than those in China do. Many traditional scholars in China believe that popular music attracts children to become infatuated with packaged images and stage performance effects, thus neglecting the theoretical aspects of music. Some also think that students who are fond of popular music may overlook other music genres that bear significant artistic connotations and cultural heritage. Similarly, some Chinese parents hold the strongly biased view that popular music has no academic value, delays academic accomplishments, and harms health [6]. On the other hand, apart from solely having a positive attitude towards incorporating popular music education in the curricula, teachers and scholars in the United States also give suggestions from multiple angles and approaches, such as Lucy Green's promotion of informal learning practices into the music classroom, while Chinese scholars mainly focused on the same aspects [13].

Due to the national curriculum standards, music classes in China have been guaranteed a seemingly sufficient number of dedicated hours, while schools in the US have been cutting down instructional time for the arts because of budget constraints. However, the real extent to which schools in China have enough music classes is questionable. Although the number of music classes in the schedule is ensured, most schools offer fewer music classes in reality. This is because many Chinese teachers hold traditional views that "minor subjects" such as music, art, and physical education are inferior to "main subjects" like mathematics and Chinese. Consequently, the phenomenon of teachers of main subjects occupying minor subjects to teach their subjects is pervasive in schools in China [20]. Unlike schools in China, which have a class interval of 40 to 45 minutes, most schools in the United States employ the system of "block scheduling". Having fewer classes each day with longer intervals, block scheduling has been associated with a decline in music class enrollment [13].

6. Conclusion

All in all, although there are significant differences in terms of history, core values, and views on popular music education in China and the United States, popular music education requires reform in both countries. The music taught in the classroom is often disconnected from the music students enjoy and listen to outside of class, leading to a decline in students' interest, participation, and enroll-

ment in music classes. After comparing popular music education in both countries, it can be concluded that music education requires reform. Music's instructional time needs to be warranted, and the content must align with students' interests while preserving the artistic and cultural value of the content. In addition, the suggestions provided reveal trends and possible future developments of popular music education in two countries: popular music education in China focuses on incorporating popular music into the curriculum more effectively to educate about musical theoretical knowledge and cultural significance through popular music; popular music education in the US highlights integrating different pedagogies and methods to teach students about how to play popular music and its significances.

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