

The Impact of Popular Music on Primary Music Education: A Comparative Study of Chinese and Malaysian Teachers' Perspectives

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Abstract

Malaysia has one of the most comprehensive Chinese language education systems outside China. Both Malaysia and China place great importance on music education to cultivate national pride and identity among students. However, students' preference for popular music often leads to decreased interest in conventional music education in the classroom. Moreover, some argue that the lyrics of popular songs can negatively influence students' values. This study explores and compares the views of music teachers in Zhengzhou, China, and Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, regarding the impact of popular music on student learning in school and their strategies for addressing potential challenges it presents in the classroom. While the 12 teachers interviewed agreed on the potential of popular music to engage students, they also acknowledged its drawbacks. Differences in their viewpoints are attributed to factors such as experience, school support, curriculum goals, individual backgrounds, and teaching abilities. Based on the findings, the study presents several recommendations to improve student learning outcomes while also addressing problems associated with the influence of popular music. These include comprehensive teacher training programmes, increased instructional time, greater social recognition of music education, and the continuous development of innovative teaching methods.

Keywords: China and Malaysia, music education, pedagogical approaches, popular music, teachers' perspectives

Introduction

The benefits of music education for children, including enhanced emotional intelligence, academic performance, and pro-social skills have been widely discussed (Blasco-Magraner et al., 2021). Many scholars recommend including music in the educational curriculum as a subject and a pedagogical tool. They contend that the “sound of school” is, in essence, music education, which aids academic learning, lowers study-related stress, and cultivates an appreciation for the arts (Bunt & Stige, 2014). Many countries have thus integrated music education into the primary school curriculum.

Primary school music education was introduced in the 1980s in both China and Malaysia (Liu, 2022). Beyond developing musical skills and aesthetic education, the music curriculum in both countries emphasises the cultivation of patriotism and nationalism (Liu, 2022). However, with advancements in media technology, students increasingly engage with popular music, a genre that may sometimes conflict with the goals of cultivating specific values through school music programmes.

Shahanum (2006) found that Malaysian youth prefer popular music over music taught in the classroom, a trend mirrored in China (Law & Ho, 2015). Contributing factors include the pervasive spread of popular music and its dominant role in the broader cultural landscape, as well as the place of music within the school curriculum. Vygotsky’s (1930/1978) social development theory highlights the importance of social interaction in cognitive development, suggesting that much learning occurs outside the classroom, with social engagement being a key driver of learning (Irwin, 2016). To capitalise on students’ interest in popular music, educators in both Malaysia and China should explore ways to integrate it into formal education to promote engagement and learning.

Malaysia’s primary education system comprises three types of government schools. To facilitate a comparative analysis of Chinese and Malaysian music education, this study focuses on the music curricula in national-type Chinese schools and public primary schools in both countries. These curricula exhibit a high degree of congruence in terms of music education systems, standards, textbook development, and overall educational objectives (Liu, 2022). Additionally, in our opinion, both Malaysia and China face similar challenges in their music education systems.

For students’ music learning to meet curriculum objectives, teachers must understand the potential conflicts between school-based music instruction and popular music trends and explore new teaching strategies to address them. Kertz-Welzel (2014) advocates for cross-cultural comparisons in music education research. Therefore, this study will examine the influence of popular music on primary school students’ learning, specifically through the lens of teachers’ perspectives. It aims to compare and analyse the challenges and strategies used by music teachers in both countries.

Previous studies have shown that the implementation of music curricula in China and Malaysia has yet to fully meet expectations. A comparative study examining the impact of popular music on primary school music education from the

perspective of teachers will provide a better understanding of the challenges encountered by music education initiatives in both countries. Additionally, such a study would contribute to discussions on preserving and promoting traditional and folk music by exploring teachers' strategies for addressing the influence of popular music on student learning.

Literature Review

Music Education in China

In 1986, the Chinese Ministry of Education established an arts education department to support the implementation of music education policies, making music education a compulsory component in primary education (Law & Ho, 2015). However, the development of music curriculum standards was marked by continuous discussion and experimentation. It was not until 2011 that China officially issued the first version of the National Full-Time Compulsory Music Curriculum Standards (Ministry of Education, People's Republic of China, 2011).

The standards are structured around four key areas: curriculum design and philosophy, goals, content, and implementation guidelines. They are intended to develop students' artistic abilities in perceiving, expressing, and creating in relation to life, emotions, culture, and technology. Additionally, the standards aim to cultivate qualities such as friendliness, cooperation, sharing, and patriotism (Ministry of Education, People's Republic of China, 2011).

Lyu (2018) interviewed two music teachers about their attitudes towards the music curriculum standards. After implementing the new standards, the teachers observed positive teaching outcomes and expressed favourable views about the curriculum reform. However, Yu and Leung (2019) argued that the standards exhibit regional limitations; in particular, they highlighted the disparity between rural and urban schools. They suggested that future curriculum standards should be developed with more significant consideration of social contexts and the specific needs of students.

Popular Music and Chinese Music Education

Since the introduction of the "open-door" policy in 1978, mainland Chinese society has been exposed to a broader range of popular music. This policy reform not only contributed to the economic development of mainland China—it also led to a diversification of youth consumption of popular music (Law & Ho, 2015). Social change has been a driving force behind and a reflection of educational transformation. The 2011 curriculum reform underlined the importance of exposing students to different cultures through music, and as part of this initiative, some popular music was added to music textbooks. However, during this period of reform, the Chinese government continued to prioritise patriotic songs, and popular music did not hold an official status (Ho, 2017).

Ho's (2017) survey of secondary school students in three Chinese cities explored their preferences for popular music, experiences with music education, and

attitudes towards its inclusion in school curricula. The study revealed that students preferred popular music, and that the popular music included in school curricula was outdated. Ho recommended that teachers stay current with music trends and seek relevant professional development opportunities.

While the literature on popular music and Chinese music education addresses students' preferences and experiences with learning popular music both in and outside the classroom, further research is needed to explore how teachers balance its influence on students' music learning while adhering to curriculum standards.

Music Education in Malaysia

In 1983, the Malaysian Ministry of Education made music education mandatory in primary schools. The music curriculum's objectives are to provide students with a fundamental understanding of music and music theory, improve their aesthetic and creative abilities, and develop a spirit of patriotism and nationalism through the study of multicultural music over a period of six years. The curriculum consists of four components: aesthetic perception, musical experience, creativity, and appreciation (Shahanum, 2006).

Current research on music education in Malaysia primarily focuses on the following aspects: 1) the development and challenges of music education (Shahanum, 2016); 2) the teaching attitudes of music educators (Wong et al., 2016); 3) students' attitudes towards learning music (Ismail, 2018); and 4) the integration of Malaysian folk songs into music instruction (Chong, 2013). These studies provide insights into the historical development, curriculum frameworks, and research areas in music education in Malaysia. However, there remain gaps in the literature, particularly in relation to music education in Malaysian Chinese primary schools.

Popular Music and Malaysian Music Education

Malaysia is a multiethnic country that comprises Malays, Chinese, Indians, and various indigenous groups, such as the Orang Asli in Peninsular Malaysia and the Iban and Kadazan in East Malaysia. The development of Malaysian popular music began after the Second World War, when British influence led to a growing preference for Western music among Malaysian youth. Following Malaysia's independence from the British in 1957, local music began to develop more distinctly. These historical factors have shaped the trends in Malaysian popular music, which blends Western influences with ethnic musical traditions (Shahanum, 2016).

Shahanum (2006) conducted a study on popular music and its role in Malaysian music education and found that the school curriculum rarely includes popular music, except in the context of aesthetic appreciation. The study also emphasised the influence of popular music on Malaysian music education, especially through students' musical preferences. Shahanum (2006) argued that although the Malaysian music curriculum has evolved to include a variety of genres, popular music should be formally integrated due to its strong appeal among students.

Current studies on popular music and music education in China and Malaysia principally focus on students' musical preferences and their engagement with popular music. However, there is limited scholarship that compares and analyses teachers' perspectives on the impact of popular music on learning in music classes across different countries. Additionally, there is a lack of research on how teachers respond to the challenge of achieving curriculum objectives within this context.

Purpose of the Study

The goal of this study is to identify the challenges and opportunities related to using popular music within the classroom setting and to explore how primary school music teachers can navigate and address its impact on music education. As such, this study aims to contribute to the development of effective strategies and approaches that lessen what some might deem harmful effects of popular music, while enhancing the quality of students' learning within the music curriculum. The research questions guiding this study are as follows:

- 1) What are the perspectives of primary school music teachers in China and Malaysia regarding the current implementation of the music curriculum?
- 2) What are Chinese and Malaysian teachers' perspectives on the impact of popular music on students' learning experiences within the music curriculum?
- 3) What strategies and approaches do primary school music teachers in China and Malaysia use to respond to the impact of popular music on students' learning within the music curriculum?
- 4) How is each context similar to or different from the other?

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research methodology and used semi-structured interviews as the primary data collection method. Semi-structured interviews are well-suited for obtaining in-depth insights and perspectives because they allow for open-ended responses and flexible probing (Smith, 2005). They also enable participants to express their opinions and talk about their experiences freely.

Sampling and Data Collection

Interviews were conducted in Zhengzhou, China, and Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Both cities are economically comparable, with Zhengzhou emerging as a first-tier city, similar to Kuala Lumpur's global city status. Kuala Lumpur has 42 Chinese primary schools, with a total student population of 42,619 and an average school size exceeding 1,050 students (Malaysia Ministry of Education, 2022). Zhengzhou has 434 public primary schools, each accommodating over a thousand students on average (Zhengzhou Education Bureau, 2023). Given that students' musical awareness and openness to diverse musical influences tend to increase with age (Ginocchio, 2006), all interview participants were selected from teachers teaching grades four to six.

Semi-Structured Interviews

The participants in this study were experienced public school teachers in China and Malaysia, specialising in upper-grade music education. Semi-structured interviews were conducted between August 2022 and February 2023, with each interview lasting about 30 minutes. The interview protocol contained 30 questions that comprised three main categories: 1) teacher demographics; 2) perceptions of music education; and 3) teachers' strategies for addressing challenges in incorporating popular music in their teaching practice.

As all participants were native Chinese speakers, interviews were carried out in Chinese and translated into English. To ensure accuracy, the translation process involved both a participant and a native English speaker. Peer review and member-checking methods were used in this study to establish the credibility of the data.

Ethical considerations were adhered to throughout the study. All participants provided informed consent, were assured of anonymity, and were free to withdraw from the study at any time. Participants were also informed that the study's findings would not result in any form of punishment.

Comparative Studies

A comparative study aims to identify similarities and differences between groups to develop broader understandings and generalisations (Adamson, 2012). In this study, a deductive coding approach was used to analyse and compare the interview responses of teachers from both countries, based on the pre-defined interview questions.

Data Analysis

Following data collection, an annotation system was developed to categorise the participants. Teachers A to F represent six Chinese teachers, while H to M are Malaysian participants (see Tables 1 and 2). The transcribed interviews were analysed using the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This

method involves a systematic process of identifying patterns and themes, creating categories, and determining the linkages between the categories.

Sinkovics (2008) suggests that qualitative software programmes like NVivo can aid researchers in analysing and interpreting textual data from interviews. In this study, NVivo was used to initially code the transcribed interviews using automated keyword searches. Subsequently, the data were further categorised based on the themes established in the interview questions and the preliminary codes generated by NVivo. This software enabled a comprehensive overview of the data by organising it into a structured format according to specific codes and categories.

Table 1. *Background information on Chinese participants*

Teachers	Gender	Professional qualifications	Years of teaching
A	F	BA, MEd	12
B	F	BA, MMus	5
C	F	BMus, MEd	10
D	F	BA, MMus	14
E	F	BMus, MEd	6
F	F	BMus	7

BA, BMus, MEd, and MMus refer to Bachelor of Arts, Bachelor of Music, Master of Education, and Master of Music, respectively.

Table 2. *Background information on Malaysian participants*

Teachers	Gender	Professional qualifications	Years of teaching
H	M	BA, MEd, PhD	12
I	F	BA, MEd	5
J	M	BA, MEd	5
K	M	BEd	6
L	F	BEd	10
M	M	BEd	4

BA, BEd, MEd, and PhD refer to Bachelor of Arts, Bachelor of Education, Master of Education, and Doctor of Philosophy, respectively.

Results and Discussion

The next section will present representative interview data organised around three themes derived from the research questions. Each of these broad themes is further divided into sub-themes, incorporating the perspectives of both Chinese and Malaysian respondents. Following the presentation of these representative excerpts, a discussion will analyse the similarities and differences in the respondents' perspectives.

Theme 1: Similarities and Differences Between Chinese and Malaysian Teachers' Perspectives on Primary Music Curriculum Implementation

Duration of Lessons and Level of School Support

China. China's 2011 music curriculum reform required specific durations for primary school music lessons. All Chinese participants confirmed that their schools offered two 40-minute music classes per week, in line with the guidelines. They also expressed satisfaction with the duration of instruction and deemed it suitable for primary school students. Furthermore, all Chinese participants reported positive levels of support for music programmes within their schools. As Teacher B noted: "School administrators are becoming more aware of the importance of music education and are treating our music teaching as very valued and supportive."

Malaysia. Malaysian primary schools provide weekly 30-minute music classes. However, Teacher I said, "There is so much content that 30 minutes a week is not enough." Participants generally felt that the allotted time and frequency of music lessons were not sufficient. Although they perceived school support for music programmes as relatively basic, they noted some positive aspects. Teacher H said, "Music classes [are] not as highly regarded as other courses, [but] the school [gives] particular funds for music lessons, thus [they are] generally supportive."

Teachers' Perspectives on Music Education and Curriculum Standards

China. Chinese participants expressed different views on the current music curriculum standards. Some perceived them as somewhat idealistic and challenging to implement consistently across regions and schools. Teacher B believed that this was due to two factors: "First, the lack of trained teachers and educational resources in some primary schools, and second, the fact that each teacher studied a different major at university—[this makes] it difficult for them to meet the standards." Although all the Chinese respondents held at least a bachelor's degree, not all specialised in music education. However, several participants viewed the music curriculum standards positively and saw them as valuable guiding principles for their teaching practices. The Chinese respondents all demonstrated a positive understanding of the importance of the music curriculum. Teacher D said,

Music education is an essential component of aesthetic education, and through learning music, students can enrich their lives and emotional experiences. [Music education provides] the foundation for them to gradually develop the right values, worldview, and necessary qualities. [It] teaches not only abilities but also character.

Malaysia. Malaysian participants expressed an optimistic outlook on their national music curriculum. Teacher J said,

The existing curriculum is adequate. There is certainly room for improvement in terms of presentation, but overall, the curriculum is consistent and split by grade level, with progressive incorporation of various instruments and skills. This is completely consistent with student growth.

Teachers also emphasised the broader significance of music education. Teacher L believes that learning music can increase students' understanding of other subjects: "I am a music teacher and a Malay instructor, and I blend both topics in my classroom to increase students' interest and recall of the curriculum content." Although not all Malaysian primary school music teachers were music majors, several participants viewed this as a positive aspect. Teachers K and M remarked that the music curriculum's relatively relaxed nature could contribute to reduced student stress.

Students' Attitudes and Quality of Learning in Music Lessons

China. When asked about their students' engagement in music classes, participants reported that they were enthusiastic. However, they noted that this enthusiasm often waned as students progressed through the grades. Teacher C observed, "When I was teaching grade one, the students would reply quite positively to my inquiries, but by grade five or six, maybe only one or two students in the class would respond voluntarily." Teacher F echoed this sentiment and suggested that older students tend to be less receptive to traditional music education and prefer popular music over the basic material presented in textbooks.

Malaysia. Participants expressed a positive attitude towards students' enthusiasm for music lessons, but they assessed the overall quality of student learning as mediocre. Teacher H attributed this to two factors: "First, there is a social lack of knowledge [about] music lessons. Second, schools still treat music as entertainment." Some participants also suggested that students' socioeconomic backgrounds and limited instructional time can affect learning outcomes. Teacher J brought up the disconnect between music included in the textbook and students' preferences, stating, "Senior primary school students don't sing textbook music. Many boys think these songs are [too childish]." Another concern raised by Teacher J was the inclusion of unfamiliar Malay traditional tunes in upper-level textbooks, which may not appeal to all students.

Teachers' Perspectives and Practices on Students' Learning of Folk and Traditional Music

China. Chinese music textbooks include a diverse range of folk and traditional songs. Teacher C said, "The various styles of music included in the textbooks are a good extension of students' musical learning, and students can use the textbook music to understand other regional and ethnic musical styles and cultures." All Chinese participants concurred on the importance of including folk or traditional music in the curriculum, with Teacher A noting that "studying Chinese folk music in textbooks helps students to develop patriotism and a national spirit."

The Chinese school music curriculum places significant emphasis on traditional music from China's diverse ethnic groups, and teachers play a key role in guiding students towards curricular objectives. Some teachers said it was vital to establish a conducive learning environment, such as exploiting the ambience of festivals to introduce folk music and using multimedia to showcase the cultural diversity of the country's ethnic groups. Teacher C thought it was crucial to engage students through familiar contexts: "There are many popular songs adapted from traditional folk music that are very popular with students, and we can use their interest as a starting point to guide them to learn traditional folk music."

Malaysia. Malaysian educators expressed support for the integration of traditional and folk music into the curriculum. Teacher K underscored the cultural and patriotic value of folk music: "Studying folk music allows students to become more aware of the local culture and its historical background. [It can strengthen] their national identity and patriotism." However, Teacher L offered a different viewpoint: "Ethnic music in textbooks is necessary but not important, and it is important to maintain a balance and give students more exposure to different types of music; otherwise, too much ethnic music can make students rebellious."

Participants offered different strategies to help students learn traditional or folk music. Teacher H described incorporating traditional music from different ethnic groups into extra-curricular activities and correlating them with the themes of Malaysian festivals. Teacher L said he links folk music with relevant content from other subjects. Teacher M suggested using games and simple instruments to make learning folk or traditional music more engaging. Table 3 presents a comparative overview of the respondents' perspectives on the implementation of the primary school music curriculum in both countries.

Table 3. *Implementation of current primary school music curriculum in China and Malaysia: A summary of teachers' responses and perspectives*

Factor	China	Malaysia
Lesson length	40 minutes	30 minutes
Frequency	Twice a week	Once a week
School support	Very supportive	Basic support
Curriculum standards	Unrealistic and idealistic; scientific and rational	Satisfied; scientific and suitable
Value of music education	Very important	Very important
Students' learning of folk/traditional music	Supportive; very important and necessary	Supportive; very necessary but balance musical genres
Strategies for including folk/traditional music	Use festivals to introduce folk/traditional music; employ multimedia to showcase cultural diversity; use popular music as a bridge to folk/traditional music	Link traditional music to other subjects; incorporate games and simple instruments to engage students; use festivals as a context for introducing traditional music

Discussion of Similarities. Participants from both countries expressed positive attitudes towards music education. According to Han and Leung (2017), the attitudes of music teachers towards both music and music education significantly influence the implementation of the music curriculum.

Teachers in both countries reported that their students were relaxed and interested in music classes. However, they also observed that the quality of students' learning was average and linked this to their age and a lack of emphasis on music education. Ginocchio (2006) suggests that students in the upper grades are more likely to be influenced by popular music.

Participants agreed on the necessity of including traditional and folk music in the curriculum for two main reasons. First, it would help students understand their cultural heritage and contribute to the preservation of their country's cultural traditions. Second, exploring music from diverse ethnic groups would broaden students' cultural horizons, promote intercultural understanding, and foster a sense of inclusivity.

Discussion of Differences. Chinese teachers were satisfied with the current duration of music lessons and the level of school support. In contrast, Malaysian participants felt that improvements were needed in terms of time allocated, frequency, and overall support for music education. According to Chen (2013), adequate teaching time is essential for accomplishing curriculum objectives. Chen (2013) also argued that school administrators play an important role in the implementation of music education, and that only when administrators fully

recognise the importance of music education can a school's music programme be treated more equitably and carried out effectively.

Regarding contemporary music curriculum requirements, several Chinese participants viewed some criteria as unrealistic, whereas Malaysian participants were optimistic. Teachers' assessment of curriculum standards is shaped by the challenges they face in their teaching practice. Disparities in educational resources, regional differences, and varying student abilities can lead to inconsistent progress towards achieving educational objectives. Sun and Leung (2014) conducted a study on music education in northeastern China and found that gaps in educational resources and students' perceptions of music learning were significant barriers to meeting curriculum standards. In contrast, the Malaysian music curriculum was found to be more straightforward, clearer, and more in keeping with students' learning abilities and the country's average level of music education (Liu, 2022).

When comparing teaching methods between the two countries, Malaysian educators appeared more innovative in integrating music with other subjects. This could be explained by two factors: first, all Malaysian respondents were graduates of teacher training universities, and second, their diverse academic backgrounds made it easier to integrate music with other disciplines.

According to Brand (2003), government-designed music textbooks often reflect the political and philosophical ideologies underpinning a country's music education. These textbooks typically outline the state's expectations for student learning. Brand (2003) argues that although textbooks reflect policy, the key question lies in how students are taught to appreciate traditional or folk music and engage with the music curriculum for educational purposes.

Both countries' music textbooks contain substantial amounts of traditional/folk music. However, attention needs to be paid to how this content is made accessible and engaging for students in practice. The strategies used by teachers in China and Malaysia offer useful insights. Future textbook designs should put more emphasis on the connection between traditional/folk music and students' daily lives, for example, by incorporating interactive elements such as games, encouraging student performances, and using the Internet and popular music as a complement. Chinese teachers could benefit from the Malaysian practice of using the Internet and designing interactive activities. Malaysian teachers could consider adopting the Chinese respondents' practices, such as providing more opportunities for student performances.

Theme 2: Similarities and Differences Between Chinese and Malaysian Teachers' Perspectives on the Impact of Popular Music on Student Learning

Teachers' Perspectives on Popular Music

China. Participants shared their perceptions of and acceptance towards popular music. Teacher B said, "I listen to popular music a lot during my daily routine since it has beautiful melodies and easy-to-understand lyrics." Teacher E remarked, "Students love popular music; I accept that, and in my everyday life, I listen to popular music the most because it is everywhere."

Malaysia. Teacher H described popular music as follows: “[It] is the music that is widely spread and more accessible in the current society, and everyone is in the context of the times, and society is influenced by popular music.” Teacher L noted that he listens to popular music regularly to stay informed about current trends and to better understand students’ musical preferences.

Teachers’ Perspectives on Students’ Exposure to and Preference for Popular Music

China. Media technology has integrated popular music into the daily lives of both students and teachers. With the widespread availability of the Internet and mobile phones, students now have greater access to popular music than ever before. Teacher B said, “Students prefer popular music as [it] makes them feel like part of a ‘team,’ and sharing their favourite popular music is a means for them to socialise.”

Malaysia. Malaysian respondents believe that students mainly engage with popular music through the Internet and exhibit a strong preference for it. Teacher M explained, “Popular music is now more accessible, and the [rhythmic] flow of popular music [resonates with students]. In addition, [older] students like popular music more because they see this behaviour as a way to keep up with trends.” Some participants said that school textbooks often feature unfamiliar music, but students prefer more recognisable popular music, mirroring their evolving musical understanding and self-perception.

Teachers’ Views on the Impact of Popular Music on Students’ Learning in Music Lessons

China. Chinese participants said that popular music has minimal impact on their students’ music learning. Teacher D said, “We should have a positive attitude [towards] understanding and recognising the music that students appreciate. Students preferring popular music shows that they are interested in music, which is a great start.” The views of the Chinese participants suggest that popular music can motivate students to engage with music and improve their skills.

Although most Chinese respondents felt that popular music had no impact on classroom instruction, some expressed concerns about students’ preferences for it. Teacher A cautioned that “some popular music with negative values and lyrics can have a detrimental effect on students.” Teacher C noted that “popular music helps enhance students’ learning of musical skills to some level, but students do not demonstrate growth in areas such as values and aesthetics through their study of popular music.”

Malaysia. Malaysian respondents agreed that popular music could assist students in developing musical skills but were divided on its potential impact on the quality of music classes. Teacher J said that popular music might lead students to lose interest in traditional music or music without a strong melodic component. Teacher H said,

Students prefer popular music, so moderate use of popular music in the classroom will stimulate students' interest in learning the school music curriculum. For example, I sometimes use popular music in order to guide students to fulfil the objectives of the curriculum standards on music skills learning. However, the use of popular music for teaching lacks educational consistency compared to music in textbooks.

According to the Malaysian participants, while popular music can support students to achieve certain skill-based outcomes, it may also hinder their progress in meeting other curriculum objectives. Table 4 provides a summary of respondents' perspectives on popular music and its impact on students' musical learning.

Table 4. *Teachers' perspectives on popular music and its impact on students' musical learning*

Questions	China	Malaysia
General perspective on popular music	Acceptance	Frequently listen to
Students' exposure to popular music	Through the Internet and classmates	Through the Internet and classmates
Whether students preferred popular music	Yes	Yes
Teachers' perspectives on students' preference for popular music	Positive attitude	Understand the appeal but have concerns about potential limitations

Discussion of Similarities. In this study, participants from both countries referenced the song “*Gu yong zhe*,” a Chinese track whose popularity spread rapidly across primary schools in China and Malaysia via TikTok and the Internet, even becoming a “code word” among students. Rauduvaitė (2018) found that students use popular songs as a means of socialising and forming their identities.

Teachers in both countries recognised that popular music is widely available, primarily through the Internet, and could help them to connect with their students. Students' main source of popular music is the Internet. As Ho (2017) suggests, extra-curricular music influences students' musical preferences. Malaysian and Chinese respondents also acknowledged and understood students' affinity for popular music, and they indicated that they were receptive to students' musical choices and were committed to creating a positive learning environment to accommodate them.

Rauduvaitė (2018) identified characteristics of popular music, such as its straightforward emotional expression, simple melodies, and easy-to-understand lyrics, which can support students' musical development. However, Rauduvaitė (2018) also emphasised the importance of purposeful and selective use of popular

music in the classroom. Green (2006) wrote that excessive use of popular music could alienate students from their preferred genres or even lead to a dislike of a school's music programme. Furthermore, Forbes (2001) argued that integrating popular music into the curriculum could limit students' exposure to other valuable genres and musical forms. The findings of the present study indicate that respondents from both countries conceded the dual nature of popular music's impact on students' music education and see its potential benefits when used intentionally.

Discussion of Differences. Teachers' assessments of the quality of their students' learning varied between the two countries. Chinese participants believed that students could still fulfil curriculum requirements despite the potential negative impact of popular music. However, Malaysian teachers felt that popular music had somewhat hindered students' learning in the classroom.

Several factors may explain this disparity. First, there are differing perspectives on how to achieve teaching goals in the two countries. Liu (2022) compared the primary school curricula in China and Malaysia and concluded that the KSSR (*Kurikulum Standard Sekolah Rendah*), the current Malaysian primary school curriculum, emphasises the mastery and application of knowledge and skills, as well as the enrichment of appreciation and the development of creative and critical skills, with a stronger emphasis on learning music ontology.

Second, participants from both countries evaluated the quality of classroom learning differently. Chinese participants were more concerned with the development of students' musical skills. They considered the successful fulfillment of textbook content requirements in post-tests as an indicator of satisfactory learning outcomes. Malaysian teachers, however, focused more on the broader goals of music education and believed that learning outcomes should fully satisfy curriculum standards. Yu and Leong (2019) argued that Chinese music teachers often lack a comprehensive understanding of how to meet curriculum standards, particularly regarding enhancing students' aesthetic education.

Third, the teachers' qualifications and teaching abilities varied across both countries. Fauth et al. (2019) noted that teachers' qualifications and teaching abilities are positively correlated with students' learning outcomes. In China, many teachers do not specialise in music education; rather they have backgrounds in areas such as voice or piano. Similarly, Malaysian teachers often do not have formal qualifications in music education. Wong and Chiu (2017) reported a shortage of professional music teachers in Malaysia and a disconnect between undergraduate programmes and actual teaching contexts.

Theme 3: Similarities and Differences Between the Strategies and Approaches Used by Teachers in China and Malaysia to Address the Impact of Popular Music on Student Learning

Approaches Used by Teachers to Respond to the Impact of Popular Music

China. Despite the limited inclusion of popular music in textbooks, most Chinese music teachers report using it to engage students. Teacher E said, "I

sometimes use popular music that the students like as a basis, [for example], using tables or cups to train the students' rhythm, and in this case, they are more motivated and interested in learning." Teacher F added: "When I need to teach traditional Chinese opera [from] the textbook, I will use some popular music in that style to guide them; this way, it will reduce the students' resistance to traditional music as it is unfamiliar to them." Teacher A said, "When I play popular music, the students may just hear the beginning of the song, and they seem really interested."

Malaysia. Malaysian teachers have more freedom to incorporate popular music into their classes to mitigate potential negative effects. Teacher J uses it to promote students' music appreciation and imagination, as well as to introduce concepts that would deepen their understanding of music featured in textbooks. Teacher K commented, "Popular music makes students more excited, joyful, and motivated, but as teachers, we must remember what we are trying to teach, and not every lesson is perfect for popular music."

Challenges in Using Popular Music as a Teaching Tool

China. Although popular music in teaching may offer certain benefits, participants brought up some challenges. Teacher A said, "Some of the music contained sexual and violent lyrics that [are] not aesthetically or cognitively appropriate for the students." Other participants voiced concerns about the constantly changing nature of popular music, which made it difficult for them to keep up and could potentially create a gap between them and their students.

Malaysia. Malaysian participants saw popular music primarily as a teaching tool and did not report challenges in using it. However, they believe that it could negatively impact students' general music education. According to Teacher K, the range and pace of some popular music are not suitable for students, even though they enjoy singing along. This, he suggested, could affect their vocal development and overall music learning.

Teachers' Perspectives on Including Popular Music in the Music Curriculum and Its Role as a Key Teaching Tool

China. Most of the Chinese participants believed that popular music could be studied as a genre to enrich students' learning experiences, but it should not be used as a primary teaching device. This approach would help ensure that students are exposed to a diverse range of genres. Teacher C, referring to the values-based aims of the curriculum standards, said that popular music often contains too much personal and emotional content, which makes careful selection necessary for its inclusion. "Popular songs that promote national culture, patriotism, and positive values should be encouraged for students to learn," Teacher C said.

Malaysia. Malaysian respondents agreed that popular music could be selectively inserted into textbooks and lessons but underscored the need for a balanced approach to maintain students' diverse musical and cultural experiences. Teacher H said, "All educational approaches are used to fulfill the teaching goals, and the use of popular music is also used to achieve some of the teaching goals and not just to cause fun for the students." Teacher H also felt that the choice of popular music should be tailored to students' interests. Teacher J expressed a preference for popular music that most students were familiar with, as it would improve teaching effectiveness. Teachers K and L emphasised that the most critical factor in popular music selection was whether the lyrics were positive and conducive to students' development. Table 5 summarises respondents' perspectives on including popular music in the curriculum.

Table 5. *Teachers' perspectives on including popular music in the music curriculum and its role as a key teaching tool*

Questions	China	Malaysia
Approaches to addressing the impact of popular music	Incorporate some popular music into the teaching process	Incorporate some popular music into the teaching process
Students' reactions to the incorporation of popular music	Excited; positive	Excited; positive
Whether or not incorporating popular music is a challenge	Yes	No
Whether or not popular music should be used as a main instructional tool	Do not agree but can be used as a supplement	Should be balanced

Discussion of Similarities. The findings reveal that teachers in both countries integrate popular music into music lessons to reduce its potential negative impacts. All respondents described students' reactions as "excited" and "positive." Davis and Blair (2011) note that students see their teachers as role models and desire validation of their musical preferences as this is a form of identification. Therefore, students tend to respond more positively when they hear familiar music. According to Powell (2011), incorporating popular music into music education allows educators to stay relevant. The studies cited above suggest that teachers' decisions to include popular music in the curriculum can be meaningful and beneficial. However, they must also be mindful of the need to maintain a diverse music education. Forbes (2001) argues that using popular music in the classroom limits the time available for students to explore other valuable musical styles or genres. This concern was echoed by teachers in both countries when discussing the use of popular music in classroom instruction.

Green (2006) discussed the “bait-and-switch” tactic of using popular music occasionally to entice students. This strategy, which involves the periodic incorporation of popular music, was commonly employed by respondents from both countries. However, Smith (2016) critiques this approach:

Although this may initially be a successful recruiting strategy, the students’ exposure to and learning of popular music is only cursory and lacks a clear educational goal. When students come to class expecting one thing but leave with an entirely other experience because they were given incomplete information, the learning atmosphere in the classroom may also suffer. (p. 46)

Smith’s observation presents a question for teachers in both countries: Does using popular music in the classroom genuinely contribute to sustained student motivation? The positive student responses to the inclusion of popular music can be credited to two primary factors: first, the familiarity of popular music, which increases student engagement and willingness to perform; and second, the teacher’s acknowledgement of students’ musical tastes and identities, which provided significant encouragement and validation.

Discussion of Differences. Participants in China identified several challenges when using popular music as a teaching tool, including the lack of positive lyrics, the transmission of correct values, and the pace at which popular music evolves. Malaysian teachers did not consider the rapid shifts in popular music to be problematic. Instead, they focused on ensuring that the use of popular music was in line with educational goals and objectives.

These challenges reflect larger issues. First, teachers acknowledged that students’ musical talents and life experiences significantly influenced their learning. Chinese participants felt that the current curriculum standards were somewhat idealistic and had practical limitations. Malaysian Teacher H said that students’ musical abilities and backgrounds determined how well they could meet the music curriculum standards. Han and Leung (2017) suggested that Chinese students’ musical talent and regional educational resources vary, which could contribute to the challenges in implementing curriculum standards. This highlights the need for future curriculum objectives to be more attuned to students’ realities, which would require extensive surveys and assessments of regional student populations.

Second, teachers in Malaysia also faced challenges stemming from the strength of educational policies and funding support. Responses from Malaysian participants revealed a desire for more teaching time and financial resources, which they identified as key barriers to effective teaching. The concerns are consistent with the findings of Mubin (2011), who identified issues such as limited teaching hours, social influences, and students’ unfamiliarity with music included in school textbooks as major obstacles in implementing the music curriculum in Malaysia. Addressing these issues requires a deeper societal and governmental understanding of music education. Chen (2013) argues that music education will only be fairly treated and effectively implemented when administrators fully appreciate its value.

Third, Chinese teachers expressed a need for greater involvement in teacher training and peer-to-peer exchange opportunities to enhance their teaching strategies and creativity. Chinese participants regarded the use of popular music in teaching as a challenge, indicating that their teaching skills and creativity required further development. Decker and Dedrick (1989) argued that peer-to-peer communication plays an important role in improving teaching quality and fostering creativity. A diversified approach to music education, combined with ongoing professional development, will be essential for teachers to overcome future challenges.

Conclusion

This study examined the similarities and differences between Chinese and Malaysian primary school teachers' perspectives on and responses to the impact of popular music on students' music learning in schools. The participants shared their assessments of the development and implementation of current curriculum standards through their teaching practices. While their perspectives were broadly similar, slight differences emerged, primarily influenced by factors such as teaching time, school support, curriculum goals, academic backgrounds, and teaching levels. All participants demonstrated a solid understanding of music education and popular music. They believed that music education could contribute to students' overall development and that popular music can support music learning in certain ways. However, they also acknowledged the possible negative impact of popular music on students. The findings suggest that teachers in both countries integrate popular music into their lessons to engage and motivate students, as well as to mitigate its potential adverse effects. Malaysian teachers specifically emphasised that the inclusion of popular music was aimed at achieving teaching goals, rather than merely sparking students' interest. Given the influence of media and the growing popularity of popular music among students, music teachers need to carefully consider how to guide and nurture students effectively while adhering to curricular requirements.

Recommendations

Chinese participants expressed a desire for greater independence, increased recognition for their subject, and access to up-to-date teaching resources. Malaysian teachers, on the other hand, stressed the need for more instructional time, stronger school support, and a renewed focus on music education. Based on these findings, several recommendations can be made.

In China, the music curriculum and textbooks should be revised to reflect the evolving media landscape, students' preference for popular music, and the ongoing tension between traditional and popular musical cultures. These revisions should be in line with curriculum standards while providing more flexibility to accommodate diverse learning needs. In Malaysia, the importance of music education should be acknowledged through increased learning time and greater school support. In terms of teacher development, China could empower teachers with greater autonomy and expand teacher training programmes. In Malaysia,

elevating the status of music teachers and increasing the number of specialised music educators are crucial steps forward. Both countries should also prioritise the development of non-skill-based outcomes in music education. Finally, while recognising the appeal of popular music, educators may wish to consider its potential harmful influence on students' values. As such, the selection and integration of popular music into the curriculum should be approached with care to minimise any unintended negative effects.

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