

# *The impact of the music curriculum in China on identity development in adolescence aged between 13 and 17*

**Rong Jin**

*Institute of Education, University College London, London, United Kingdom  
dtnvrji@ucl.ac.uk*

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**Abstract:** This article focuses on reflections on the impact of the creation of a music curriculum on the development of young people's identity in a Chinese context. What is worth thinking about in this issue is the meaning of music for human beings and its impact on mental health? What is the significance of having a music programme for students and how does the music programme contribute to the development of young people's identity in the field of psychology? This study will be divided into three parts to discuss, what are the characteristics of the music curriculum for 13–17-year-olds in China? And how does the Chinese music curriculum affect the identity development of young people? And at the end of the article, recommendations are given for readers' reference.

## **1. Introduction**

Music is one of the most universal forms of human communication (Mehr et al., 2019). Welch et al. (2020) state that it represents an enjoyable activity in its own right. Many facets of human existence, such as education and psychological cognition, can be positively influenced by successful involvement with music, according to scientific studies (Biasutti & Concina, 2013). Long-term musical training and related skill acquisition can strongly stimulate neural changes in the brain ( Schlaug, 2015). Research on the brain has led to a deeper understanding of how active participation in music and self-identity develops (ibid). Although human knowledge of how the brain works is still limited, aspects of psychological development regarding music learning have been confirmed (Hodges & Thaut, 2018). Thaut et al.'s (2014) study on the brain learned that actively engaging in music can significantly affect other activities. This is in line with the findings of Biasutti and Concina (2013) above. It is therefore important to create a music learning board for the overall promotion of human mental health and learning development, especially for groups of young people who are at a particular stage of developing their self-identity.

## **2. Music Curriculum**

The music curriculum does not just serve as a template document to guide teachers (Cooke & Spruce, 2016). Philpott and Wright (2012) point out that the links between teaching, learning and curriculum content are complex and multifaceted. At its most basic, curriculum thinking involves the question of what, of all the things that can be taught, should be taught? And what is most worth

learning (Regelski, 2003)? Emerging music curricula require teachers to teach, discuss, and construct knowledge with students, and require teachers to reflect critically (Cooke & Spruce, 2016). Register (2001) states that the music curriculum includes several activities, particularly the four areas of listening, performing, responding and composing. The overall objectives of the Chinese Ministry of Education's Full-time Compulsory Education Music Curriculum Standards (2011 Edition) (hereinafter referred to as the Curriculum Standards) include fostering students' overall personal development, learning basic musical knowledge and skills, and developing positive attitudes and a healthy body. Music teachers need a conceptual framework when thinking and talking about music curriculum and pedagogy and describing change and progress (Philpott & Wright, 2012).

Welch et al. (2020) state that music can be both something that happens formally (e.g. school lessons) and in informal situations. In addition to traditional music education, music education in the digital age has become an important developmental environment for adolescents and young people (Damon, 2004). Increasingly, young people are using the Internet to learn music (Buckingham, 2006; Clark et al., 2009; Furlong & Davies, 2012). Gordon (2003) notes that adolescents listen, respond, perform and create music differently from adults. A survey of data by Whitaker et al. (2014) suggests that more adolescents than adults use YouTube for teaching and learning music, possibly because their tendencies and behavioural styles do not align with adult norms and values (Sturman et al., 2010). Also, Cauffman and Steinberg (2000) indicated that there are some differences in the perceptions of adolescents and adults. In addition, previous research has demonstrated that adolescents are more involved in creative development related to music learning than adults, which is related to the opportunities they encounter in and out of school (Campbell et al., 2007; Krasil'nikov, 2020).

Despite these benefits, adolescent participation in music programs has also been described as overly self-focused, risk-takers, and highly susceptible to social pressures (Pfeifer & Berkman, 2018). This may lead to a negative impact on their self-perception. In addition, Marcia (1966) and Newman and Newman (1988) describe adolescents as experiencing an 'identity crisis', which includes the exploration of various possible identities.

In light of the above issues, it is crucial to understand the impact of the music curriculum in the field of psychology, particularly on adolescent identity development. The findings will provide some implications to enhance the development of their self-concept, abilities, attributes and values, their perception and their definition of themselves. Based on this rationale, this study is divided into three parts: namely, what are the characteristics of the music curriculum for 13-17 year olds in China? What is the impact of the Chinese music curriculum on identity development? Concluding with recommendations. The full paper aims to explore how the Chinese music education curriculum affects the identity development of young people.

### **3. Characteristics of the music programme for 13–17-year-olds in China**

This section explores the characteristics of the music curriculum for 13–17-year-olds in China, where music teaching becomes a teacher-centred task and the student operates only as a passive 'recipient' (Ellis, 2004). The Curriculum Standards are considered to be the official music curriculum for Chinese schools (Yu & Leung, 2019). However, it does not consider either how the lessons are planned or structured or whether they are effective and, if not, how they should be improved (ibid). As a result, an alienated school music education was created. These views lead to very similar conclusions, namely that the starting point of the music curriculum should be democratic ideals rather than musical preferences.

In China, music education is compulsory for students aged 13 to 17. In the past decade, a compulsory music curriculum has been developed to improve the musical literacy of students, including the promotion and improvement of their level of musical competence and knowledge (Li,

2022). This suggests that compulsory music education at that age brings with it specialist courses as well as examinations. Similarly, Zhu (2021) suggests that the music curriculum has been designed as a tool to measure students' musical literacy and competence. As a result, nationally, the music curriculum has been linked to school entrance examinations. This helps to develop students' musical literacy and competence at a higher level, fostering the learning and expression of musical elements to enhance music learning (Khasanova, 2020). In addition, compulsory music education in secondary schools facilitates the teaching of rhythm, pitch and the intensity of musical elements. As a result, formal music instruction in middle and high school is often targeted at students who are fortunate enough to participate in music programs, as schools tend to devote most of their time to improving students' entrance exam scores to college or university (Dong, 2019). At this stage, the music curriculum lacks school attention, even though it is an important part of students' schooling. Daily musical activities consisted only of singing and playing classroom instruments, usually in large groups in the classroom (Ho, 2014; Reimer, 1989). Ho (2014) suggests that globalisation and modernisation have created challenges for the school music curriculum as students are increasingly demanding music education and access to music sharing on the internet. As a result, adolescents' self-identities change in more complex ways (Hargreaves et al., 2002).

Yu and Leung (2019) explain that the music curriculum is an important component of aesthetic education and it has a significant impact on students' identity development. In Chinese music education, it has been found that a professional music curriculum not only helps to develop musical literacy but also assists students in developing critical thinking and a set of perceptions about their identity (Xie & Leung, 2011). In Philpott and Wright's (2012) study, they argue that decisions about the content of music lessons should be based on certain characteristics of 13- to 17-year-olds. Therefore, Philpott and Wright (2012) suggest that music lessons at this age should be an important part of the compulsory curriculum before becoming optional between the ages of 14 and 18 and that music lessons should be organised, timetabled and resourced as a specialist subject for young people.

The music curriculum for students in the 13 to 17 age group is different from the previous age group and the officially published Curriculum Standards should be developed as a professional curriculum to support student self-discovery and self-definition (Philpott & Wright, 2012). In addition, music programmes are developed to prepare students to become musicians, also because traditional music programmes tend to alienate young people from music education in schools (Sturman et al., 2010). In traditional education, hierarchical structures underpin the transmission and construction of musical knowledge, which expresses the relationship between students and teachers within the music classroom through the weakened and strengthened categorisation and framing of musical knowledge (Mishra et al., 2011; Qin, 2020). Students are often weakly empowered by strong knowledge categorisation and framing, and as a result, they are unable to participate in deciding which musical knowledge and practices are important to them (Mishra et al., 2011).

For 13 to 17 year olds, the development of their self-identity in the music curriculum is often overlooked due to the overemphasis on musical literacy to conform to central government values (Blasi & Glodis, 1995). The current Chinese music curriculum makes it difficult to increase students' interest and engagement in music learning in middle or high school music education (Xie & Leung, 2011).

From Roberts' (2007) point of view, musical tastes and preferences form a key part of an individual's life and self-concept. Individuals' musical preferences reveal more about their personalities than their preferences for books, clothing, food, films and television programmes (Rentfrow & Gosling, 2003). This suggests that in the absence of musical interests and preferences, it is difficult to use music programmes to support young people in achieving self-identity development (Roberts, 2007). The Chinese music curriculum focuses on students' musical literacy, which is used for testing examinations. In other words, there is a lack of comprehensiveness in

identifying the relationship between disciplinary characteristics and student needs and curriculum design (Dong, 2019). Therefore, there is a need to improve the music curriculum for young people learning music in China.

At the same time, music psychology has received sufficient attention in music education (Cross, 2014). From neuroscience research on music processing, there is evidence that the brain can develop in very specific ways in response to specific activities involved in music lessons (Anderson, 2021; Hiller et al., 2016). The development or change in the brain is dependent on the amount of time the learner is involved in music learning. Altenmüller (2003) argues that the basis of musical processing is reflective of an individual's learning biography, which presents musical opportunities and has an impact on their psychological aspects. These findings are in line with the growing awareness that musical learning can be best understood in terms of professional knowledge. That is, early exposure to music can equip learners with musical listening patterns developed for adults or adolescents (ibid). The above findings provide a basis for understanding the design of music programmes for 13- to 17-year-olds (Anderson, 2021; Altenmüller, 2003; Hiller et al., 2016).

#### **4. The Impact of Chinese Music Curriculum on Youth Identity Development**

Music lessons during adolescence are important for the development of self-identity and are a source of support for young people when they feel lonely or distressed (Leung, 2011). The concept of identity refers to how people perceive themselves (Weigand, 2015). In China, where there is debate about China's current and future role in the world, researchers have focused on national identity in a global context (Jensen et al., 2011). In music education, psychologists argue that identity is dependent on the social and cultural context in which it is studied (Ethier & Deaux, 1994; Huddy, 2001). Several scholars have proposed a concept of musical identity which is useful in exploring current issues in youth music education (Bartolome, 2015; Pellegrino, 2009; Spruce & Odena, 2012; Sun, 2022). They look at self-theory to provide explanations for some of the key issues in music learning and development for young people during their schooling years. Therefore, this study focuses on musical identity to explore the issue of the impact of the Chinese music curriculum on the development of self-identity.

A broad pattern of preferences forms part of musical identity (Hargreaves et al., 2002). Musical identity was first defined by Hargreaves et al. (2002) and then generally defined as the way a person sees themselves in their cultural and social roles in music (Walling & Lewis, 2000; Yang, 2021). For example, the role can be that of a musician, performer, music teacher or composer, with a professional focus, or a music lover, with an amateur interest and hobby. Musical identity is also distinct from music in identity (Hargreaves et al., 2002). Scholars have defined music in identity as how music plays an important role in shaping an individual's self-image in terms of gender, age, identity and national identity (Hargreaves & Marshall, 2003). In contrast to music in identity, musical identity emphasises how music educators, such as teachers, use the music curriculum to influence the musical development and learning of students, including young people in China. To explore the research, the following section focuses on musical identity.

Adolescents must discover their own identities and know the social roles they play (Crosnoe, 2000). The development of adolescent identity is particularly important for 13- to 17-year-olds, as adolescence is a critical period for developing self-identity (Echard, 2019; North & Hargreaves, 1999). Hargreaves et al. (2002) state that music is increasingly used as a tool for us to form and express our identity. Not only do we use it to regulate our daily emotions and behaviour, but we also use it to present ourselves to others in a way that we like. Due to its importance, teenagers can often be seen experimenting with its fashionable style and music. Today, popular culture and music help to assist young people in developing an important sense of identity (Childs, 2014). As a result, many educators

and scholars encourage young people to feel comfortable and confident in who they are (Greenberg et al., 2003).

Although identity development has received attention from educators and Chinese scholars (Xie & Leung, 2011; Yu & Leung, 2019), questions remain about how music programmes can be used to influence youth identity development. In Dong's (2019) study, short videos in various forms and rich content enrich the spare time and cultural life of Chinese people, and short videos should be used in music courses to disseminate and foster more positive styles. Furthermore, there is evidence that music, as an important vehicle for new media communication, embodies a mechanism for the development of musicians that can bring critical thinking to students (Micheloni et al., 2018). From the research, music educators should be encouraged to use short videos to improve the quality of music education for their students. Vicky (a 15-year-old student at Shenzhen Senior High School) is a case in point. Her self-composed song "She" using multimedia has allowed her to gain 164,000 followers. This case shows us that today's music lessons involving short videos can have a positive impact on young people, such as stimulating their preference and interest in music and improving their self-confidence, as well as relieving stress, increasing creativity and encouraging young people to step out of their comfort zone (Wulandari, 2021). From the perspective of Cohrdes and Kopiez (2015), there is a strong link between musical activity and identity.

In middle and high school, adolescents become more sensitive in terms of psychological development and they tend to compare themselves to their peers (Zhou et al., 2017). To some extent, a sense of self-identity is developed (Chua & Chang, 2016). However, it cannot be ruled out that some adolescents have a tendency to have low self-esteem, believing that they are not 'on par' with their peers (Merianos et al., 2021). In addition, the pressure caused by teachers and parents for high school entrance exams can bring about oppressive education and lead to the unhealthy psychological development of adolescents in that age group (Dong, 2019). In this state, Chinese teenagers may develop the idea of "breaking the bucket". Li (2011) criticises that the traditional music curriculum focuses more on subjective assessment rather than providing students with the opportunity to objectively evaluate themselves. In this way, students' healthy physical and mental development is greatly hindered. Currently, Chinese educators have become increasingly aware of the problem of neglecting the identity development needs of young people and thus promoting the overall quality and development of quality education (Peng et al., 2014). Teachers can help young people to increase their self-confidence and develop their self-identity through positive assessment in music education (Georgii-Hemming & Westvall, 2010). The rise of short videos has stimulated students' curiosity and, as a result, teachers are now recording their students' excellence in the music learning process, supported by short videos on social media. Galbraith and Rodriguez (2018) claim that this method of teaching in the music curriculum is an important method of assessment that is easily accessible to young people in this age group. This is an important way to enhance interaction and communication between students and teachers.

In addition to social media, music educators can also enhance communication between students and teachers by focusing on multicultural music in the curriculum (Fung, 1995). Folkestad (2002) points out that multicultural music is an important way to increase young people's interest in and preference for music related to the development of their self-identity. The Little Herding Cow is a folk song from the Hebei region of China and is part of the music curriculum for Year 7 students in the Chinese Curriculum Standards (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China [MOE], 2011). The outstanding expressiveness and creativity of this folk song drives interactions between teachers and students. These interactions help young people to develop new skills and heights as performers, listeners and composers. In addition, students are also introduced to folk music and the historical perspective of the Zhaozhou Bridge, actively incorporating musical interests and behaviours into students' individual and collective identities, such as becoming a fan of folk music,

becoming a performer, or becoming an instrumentalist (Ho, 2014). In MacDonald et al.'s (2017) study, the age of 12 to 14 is a turning point in identity formation, as most adolescents in this age group will change schools from primary to secondary. Furthermore, identity development at this stage is in an identity crisis, as the elements of identity established in primary school are very different from those they formed in childhood (Lamont, 2002), such as their expectations, interests, perceptions and preferences regarding music. Music teaching and learning at the adolescent level relies on music found in both out-of-school and in-school settings, and the interplay between formal and informal school music activities (Ho, 2014). At the turning point, the interaction between teachers and students helps to achieve the development of the school's music programme. Communication and interaction in music lessons can therefore have a positive impact on the development of young people's identities.

From the above critical analysis, in line with Spruce and Odena's (2012) vision of focusing on careers, an important aspect of musical identity that assists individuals in forming their self-occupations, such as music teachers and musicianship, should be emphasised and embedded in the music curriculum for young people. Ho (2014) conducted an empirical study and found that Chinese students showed a preference for various popular music styles in the classroom and their daily lives, as well as expectations of the teaching profession to enhance their learning in the field. This may reflect the formation of dual or multiple identity development in their professional development, such as the student's view of themselves as performers, their view of themselves as music teachers and their view of themselves as composers. This is in line with the view that multiple role identities and how teachers and students interact with each other can greatly influence students' perceptions of their self-concept and careers (Howard, 2003).

However, sometimes role identity development can create barriers to the primary role played by the music education profession as music teachers' role identity development is prevalent in adolescents' identity development (Brewer, 2014). Haning (2020) argues that the development of professional identity in music education among adolescents remains static, possibly because many adolescents have limited opportunities to develop, maintain and sustain their needs for a specific musical identity during their school years. As students have many opportunities to participate in music activities outside of school, they feel dissatisfied with democratic music education in high school in terms of career development. This puts a lot of pressure on music educators. To address this, new approaches such as technology should be explored and used to address the detachment between music in young people's lives and music in schools. This helps to create a democratised environment in which students can learn, create, innovate and develop themselves.

The overall analysis also showed that young people's interest and preference for music and their musical activities were closely linked to their self-identity development. The Chinese music curriculum should therefore take this into account and foster a relaxed music learning atmosphere in the classroom to stimulate their interest in learning. Positive emotions and positive mental states can be developed (Lagattuta & Wellman, 2002).

## 5. Conclusions

This study examines the characteristics of music programmes for young people aged 13-17. The findings show that the Chinese music curriculum emphasises the enhancement of students' musical literacy, musical ability and higher level knowledge. In addition, the music curriculum in China is closely linked to school entrance examination tools across the country. Music courses are compulsory for young people of all ages. However, the music curriculum in China pays insufficient attention to the characteristics of this group and places more emphasis on examinations and tests.

In addition, this study found that 13-17 year olds were more sensitive. Discussions on the impact of the music curriculum on the identity development of young people in China imply that a music

curriculum that includes listening, composing, producing and performing helps young people to understand their social and cultural roles in music. However, music programmes that ignore the characteristics of young people lead to a disconnection between the music in their lives and the music in school. In addition, the use of social media and new technologies by young people to make short videos about music has put pressure on the teaching of music in schools. Based on the findings, this study offers a number of recommendations, including the development of a music curriculum to help students develop an identity for their future careers and to foster their interest in music learning.

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