

Exploring Music Education Methods in Shanghai's Specialized and General High Schools

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Abstract: *This paper investigates the music education methods utilized in Shanghai's specialized and general high schools, emphasizing curriculum content and structure, pedagogical strategies, and educational environments as key components. In specialized high schools, such as The Affiliated High School of Shanghai Conservatory of Music, the method prioritizes intensive training in performance skills and music theory, blending traditional Chinese and Western musical traditions to groom students for professional careers. Conversely, general high schools, exemplified by Shanghai Gezhi Middle School, adopt a holistic approach, integrating music education with cultural literacy and creative expression within a comprehensive curriculum. This comparative study reveals how these methods reflect distinct educational philosophies—technical mastery versus cultural enrichment—and influence the quality of musical instruction. By dissecting these elements, the paper offers insights into optimizing music education practices to meet diverse student needs, providing valuable implications for educators and policymakers in China's dynamic educational context.*

Keywords: Music education methods; Curriculum design; Pedagogical strategies; Educational environment; Shanghai high schools.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background

Music education plays a pivotal role in fostering artistic talent, cultural understanding, and personal development. In Shanghai, a global hub of culture and education, music education methods differ markedly between specialized and general high schools, reflecting varied goals and societal expectations. Specialized high schools focus on producing professional musicians through rigorous, performance-oriented programs (Bao, 2020), while general high schools aim to cultivate well-rounded individuals by embedding music within a broader curriculum (Chen, 2017). These methods—comprising curriculum design, teaching strategies, and learning environments—shape how students engage with music, making their study essential for understanding educational effectiveness in China.

1.2 Problem Statement

The diversity of music education methods in Shanghai's high schools raises critical questions about their impact. Specialized schools may excel in technical training but risk neglecting creativity, whereas general schools might prioritize inclusivity over depth (Law & Ho, 2011). This disparity highlights a gap in understanding how these methods balance skill acquisition, cultural appreciation, and creative growth, necessitating a detailed exploration.

1.3 Objectives

This study seeks to:

- Examine the curriculum content and structure of music education in Shanghai's specialized and general high

schools.

- Assess the pedagogical strategies used and their influence on musical learning.
- Investigate the role of the educational environment in supporting these methods.

1.4 Significance of the Study

By analyzing these methods, this paper contributes to improving music education practices in Shanghai. It provides educators with strategies to balance technical and creative development and informs policymakers on enhancing curriculum design and resource allocation.

1.5 Scope

The study focuses on music education methods in Shanghai's specialized and general high schools, exploring curriculum, pedagogy, and environment, without addressing specific student outcomes, which are beyond its scope.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Conceptual Framework: Music Education Methods

Music education methods serve as the framework for this study, encompassing curriculum content and structure, pedagogical strategies, and educational environments. These components interact to define the instructional process, influenced by China's blend of Eastern and Western musical traditions (Law & Ho, 2011). Curriculum dictates what and how students learn, pedagogy shapes teaching delivery, and the environment affects engagement and motivation (Bandura, 1997). This framework enables a comparative analysis of specialized and general high schools.

2.2 Curriculum Theories and Practices

Curriculum design in music education varies by institutional focus. Specialized high schools adopt a linear progression, emphasizing performance skills (e.g., piano, erhu) and music theory, rooted in professional training goals (Bao, 2020). General high schools use a spiral approach, revisiting themes like music history and cultural appreciation to reinforce learning (Anderson et al., 2001). These structures reflect differing priorities: depth for career preparation versus breadth for holistic education (Elliott, 1995).

2.3 Pedagogical Approaches

Teaching strategies range from direct instruction in specialized schools—focusing on mastery of technique—to inquiry-based and collaborative methods in general schools, encouraging creativity and peer learning (Green, 2008). Technology, such as digital composition tools, enhances both approaches, though its use aligns with institutional objectives (Burnard, 2012). These strategies determine how effectively curriculum content is conveyed (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005).

2.4 Role of the Educational Environment

The learning environment, including resources and psychological climate, shapes music education outcomes. Specialized schools offer advanced facilities (e.g., recording studios) and competitive cultures that boost self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997), while general schools foster supportive, inclusive settings that encourage exploration (Usher & Pajares, 2008). These factors influence how curriculum and pedagogy are experienced (Hallam, 2010).

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This qualitative study uses a theoretical analysis to explore music education methods, synthesizing literature to compare specialized and general high schools in Shanghai.

3.2 Sample

The study examines specialized high schools (e.g., The Affiliated High School of Shanghai Conservatory of Music) and general high schools (e.g., Shanghai Gezhi Middle School), representing contrasting educational models.

3.3 Data Collection Tools

Data are drawn from relevant literature, including works on curriculum (Law & Ho, 2011; Anderson et al., 2001), pedagogy (Green, 2008; Burnard, 2012), and environment (Bandura, 1997; Usher & Pajares, 2008).

3.4 Data Analysis

A thematic analysis compares curriculum, pedagogy, and environment across the two school types, identifying key characteristics and implications.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Curriculum Content and Structure

In specialized high schools, the curriculum is intensive, focusing on advanced music theory, performance techniques, and traditional Chinese instruments like the pipa, alongside Western classical music. This linear structure progresses from foundational skills to professional-level mastery, aligning with career-oriented goals (Bao, 2020). Lessons are sequenced to build technical proficiency, with frequent assessments ensuring progress. For example, students might spend years perfecting a single instrument, supported by courses in ear training and composition (Law & Ho, 2011). This depth prepares them for conservatory auditions but may limit exposure to broader musical styles.

General high schools, however, offer a diverse curriculum integrating music with cultural studies, history, and basic theory. Using a spiral structure, topics are revisited with increasing complexity, fostering retention and cultural literacy (Anderson et al., 2001). Classes might explore folk songs one semester and Western harmony the next, emphasizing appreciation over specialization (Chen, 2017). While this approach broadens students' horizons, it often lacks the rigor needed for advanced skill development, reflecting its aim of holistic education (Elliott, 1995).

4.2 Pedagogical Strategies

Specialized schools rely on direct instruction, where teachers model techniques and provide individualized feedback, such as correcting finger placement on a violin (Green, 2008). Masterclasses with professional musicians supplement this, offering real-world insights. This teacher-centered approach ensures precision but may stifle improvisation. Technology, like music notation software, is used to refine compositions, aligning with professional standards (Burnard, 2012).

In general high schools, pedagogy is student-centered, featuring group projects (e.g., composing a class song) and inquiry-based learning (e.g., analyzing musical influences). Teachers facilitate discussions, encouraging creativity and collaboration (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005). Technology supports this through tools like GarageBand, enabling experimentation. While this fosters engagement, it may not provide the structured guidance needed for technical mastery (Chen, 2017).

4.3 Educational Environment

Specialized schools boast state-of-the-art resources—concert halls, practice rooms, and high-quality instruments—creating an immersive environment (Bao, 2020). The competitive atmosphere, with peer performances and auditions, enhances motivation and self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997). However, this pressure can intimidate less confident students.

General schools offer basic facilities—classrooms with keyboards or traditional instruments—and a supportive climate where mistakes are part of learning (Usher & Pajares, 2008). This inclusivity encourages participation but limits access to advanced tools, potentially hindering skill growth (Hallam, 2010). The contrast underscores how environment reinforces each method's goals.

4.4 Discussion

Specialized high schools excel in producing skilled musicians, leveraging a focused curriculum, expert-led pedagogy, and rich resources. However, their emphasis on technique may overlook creativity, a gap noted by Burnard (2012), who advocates for improvisation in music education. General schools nurture cultural appreciation and creative expression, yet their broad approach dilutes technical depth, a challenge in resource-constrained settings (Law & Ho, 2011). Integrating specialized rigor with general creativity—e.g., adding composition to specialized curricula or technical workshops to general schools—could enhance both methods.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusion

This study illuminates the music education methods in Shanghai's high schools. Specialized schools prioritize technical excellence through a linear curriculum, direct instruction, and competitive environments, while general schools emphasize cultural breadth via a spiral curriculum, collaborative pedagogy, and inclusive settings. Each method reflects distinct educational philosophies, shaping musical instruction uniquely.

5.2 Recommendations

- Specialized Schools: Incorporate creative activities like improvisation to balance technical focus.
- General Schools: Enhance technical training with additional resources and expert instructors.
- Policy: Encourage cross-model collaboration, sharing facilities and teaching strategies to optimize music education.

Future research should examine how these methods affect student outcomes, such as skill proficiency and creativity, to refine their application.

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