

Original Paper

Investigating Pathways to Foster Musical Aesthetic Competence in Middle School Music Classrooms

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Abstract

In April 2022, the Ministry of Education released the "High School Education Art Curriculum Standards (2022 Edition)" (hereinafter referred to as the "2022 New Curriculum Standards"). Compared to the 2017 edition, this new standard has undergone adjustments in several aspects, primarily focusing on enhancing the educational function of the curriculum and optimizing the structure of the curriculum content. Despite significant surface-level changes, the core concept remains rooted in "aesthetic education," aiming to cultivate students through the fundamental task of "establishing moral character and nurturing people." The standard emphasizes that art education should focus on developing students' aesthetic and humanistic literacy. Through the permeation of aesthetic education, students can cultivate rich aesthetic interests and enhance their artistic literacy, thereby fully recognizing the importance of aesthetic education. In the process of implementing aesthetic education, how to effectively improve students' aesthetic abilities in music teaching has become a critical issue. This article selects a certain middle school as the research subject, explores the issues and causes faced by high school students in music aesthetic education at this school, and according to the requirements of the "2022 New Curriculum Standards," proposes a series of constructive paths for cultivating students' aesthetic abilities.

Keywords

music aesthetic ability, music aesthetic education, high school students, classroom teaching

1. Introduction

1.1 Research on Music Aesthetic Education

In the wake of the release of the "2022 Edition of the New Curriculum Standards", the field of music education has raised the bar for cultivating students' aesthetic sensibilities. Against this backdrop, music aesthetic awareness, as a unique human spiritual phenomenon, has garnered extensive attention

from the academic community. Tian (2022) in his study "Analysis and Strategies for the Current State of Students' Music Aesthetic Abilities in Middle School Music Education" explicitly states that fostering students' music aesthetic abilities is the core objective of music education. Targeted pedagogical strategies can significantly enhance teaching effectiveness, laying a solid foundation for students' holistic development. Additionally, numerous scholars have explored the importance of aesthetic abilities from various perspectives including music perception, instrumental performance, and vocal music, highlighting their profound impact on students' quality education.

The primary method for enhancing students' aesthetic abilities is through classroom instruction. In the process of teaching, exploring the aesthetic role of music has become a significant topic in the field of music education research. Ganlu (2018) in his work "Practical and Aesthetic Reflections on Music Education" suggests that cultivating musical aesthetic capabilities should be integrated with music educational practices, proposing several strategies: Firstly, enriching the curriculum content to effectively strengthen students' aesthetic awareness. Secondly, focusing on experiential learning through music, allowing students to immerse themselves in practical activities to gain personal experiences, thereby effectively enhancing their aesthetic abilities. Thirdly, creating a musically aesthetic environment, where beauty is the core of musical aesthetics. Only by sparking students' interest and generating aesthetic appreciation can students deeply experience the beauty of musical works, thus more effectively cultivating their aesthetic abilities. Additionally, scholars such as Guo (2021) and Wang (2018) have pointed out that the traditional music education methods of "cramming" and "ivory tower effect" have led to students losing interest in music classes. This requires teachers to keep up with the times, promptly update educational concepts, develop innovative thinking, and change traditional teaching philosophies to enhance students' musical aesthetic abilities.

Scholar Tian (2019) posited that adopting a pedagogical approach centered on appreciation and diverse cultivation paths can effectively enhance middle school students' musical appreciation skills, thereby achieving the goal of fostering aesthetic abilities. Zhang (2004) argued that musical perception is a fundamental component of musical aesthetic competence. Through systematic deliberate practice, students' musical perception can be gradually improved, thereby elevating their musical aesthetic abilities. She emphasized the need to comprehensively cultivate students' musical aesthetic abilities from various aspects including aesthetic interests, auditory sensitivity, and imagination. Additionally, Huang (2017) proposed that "synesthesia" is an effective method to enhance musical aesthetic abilities, aiding in strengthening students' aesthetic perception, enhancing musical imagination, and deepening their ability to feel music and form attitudes towards musical aesthetics.

1.2 Research on the Aesthetic Ability of Music

In the West, the historical roots of music aesthetic education can be traced back to ancient Greece. Beginning with Pythagoras' theory of "music purifying the soul" and extending to the direct impact of movement and sound on emotions, the framework of this thought was gradually refined. Democritus and Plato emphasized the importance of music education and its connection to beauty (Yin, 2004).

Aristotle further developed Plato's ideas, asserting that "aesthetic education" plays a crucial role in the "catharsis" of tragedy and advocated for enhancing individual aesthetic abilities through music courses. Notably, Schiller elevated the theory of aesthetic education to new heights in "Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man," profoundly revealing the educational value of music aesthetic activities and fully underscoring the importance of music aesthetic education (Yang, 2014).

In the United States, music educator Bennett Reimer highlighted the central role of aesthetic education in teaching in his 1960s book "The Philosophy of Music Education," suggesting that music education can enhance people's musical taste (Bennett 2003; Julia, 1994). Similarly, Austrian music educator Wolfgang (2008) emphasized the importance of music aesthetic cognition in "Introduction to Music Pedagogy," indicating that aesthetic awareness and good cultivation can be achieved through aesthetic education. Concurrently, American musicologist David Elliott, in his 2009 work "Music Matters: A New Philosophy of Music Education," emphasized that aesthetics is an emotional experience, inseparable from music, highlighting the importance of music listening and the essence of music aesthetic education. This marked the first explicit mention of "listening" as a pathway for music aesthetic education, indicating initial conceptions in the United States regarding this pathway, although specific works on the cultivation of music aesthetic education have yet to be discovered.

2. The Cultivation of Musical Perception

2.1 Listen to Music Effectively

In everyday life, listening appears to be particularly simple, occurring at any moment within our interactions with the environment, encompassing sounds such as rain, frog croaks, honking, and language. From the perspective of music creation, not everyone can compose or perform, but anyone with normal hearing possesses the ability to listen to music, which is also a prerequisite for the development of aesthetic capabilities. However, achieving systematic, professional, and in-depth music listening and aesthetic experiences is no easy task. Therefore, it is our duty to assist and guide students in effectively listening to music, cultivating their musical aesthetic abilities while enhancing their musical literacy and cultural quality.

Accordingly, in music classroom instruction, it is essential to initiate effective listening training for adolescents early on. Starting from the initial level of musical appreciation, gradually enhance their auditory sensitivity and build a unique consciousness of musical understanding. This process allows them to comprehend, perceive, and memorize the evolving musical changes, gradually recognizing the specific patterns of music and accumulating rich perceptual experiences. Students should be taught to utilize music, a specialized language, for aesthetic auditory training, interpreting the beauty of musical forms through changes in sound. Through targeted training, students can develop conscious music listening skills. Additionally, listening requires thought and knowledge. As noted by renowned musicologist David Elliott in his 2009 book "Praxis: A New Music Education Philosophy," "Listening is essentially a covert form of thought and action." Listening is inherently thoughtful; for example,

when listening to Beethoven's "Symphony of Fate" and "Ninth Symphony," the melodies influence our emotions. Some may perceive the differences in progression and leap in the two pieces, while others might focus on the distinct stylistic contrasts. Although everyone's listening emphasis varies, the process of listening "involves silently and covertly thinking about the effects of musical sounds, expanding our perception, imagination, and creative understanding of musical forms within the soundscape, and experiencing diverse stylistic characteristics in musical aesthetic practices."

2.2 Improve Music Literacy

To achieve effective listening, it is essential to comprehend the essence of musical language. This language is a composite form consisting of various elements such as rhythm, melody, tempo, dynamics, timbre, and harmony. Each of these fundamental elements holds distinct significance within every piece, and intricate compositions typically require these elements to be intricately woven together in a logical manner. Among these, rhythm stands as the primary element, serving as the skeleton of music, indispensable in its role. The concept of rhythm was first documented in "Yue Ji," where it was used to describe the dynamic relationships within a musical composition. Today, numerous rhythmic forms have been identified and created, each exhibiting unique stylistic characteristics, with typical "rhythm patterns" often spanning entire compositions, becoming a significant aspect of the work's expression.

Timbre is one of the most expressive elements in musical language, capable of evoking diverse emotions and adding various nuances to musical works. Timbre is the most sensory element of music presented to the listener, analogous to texture in sculpture and color in painting. In artistic experiences, different textures and colors can evoke distinct moods. For instance, marble invokes a sense of steadfastness, red a passionate feeling, and various timbres such as the "clear and elegant" sound of a chime bell, the "rich and beautiful" tone of an organ, or the "mournful and sorrowful" melody of an erhu, can stir different emotional responses.

Having grasped these musical elements, how can one enhance students' musical literacy? For example, through practical activities in music classes, teachers can play renowned pieces like "Moonlight Reflected on the Second Spring" on the erhu, "Lament of Lin'an" on the guzheng, and "Butterfly Lovers" on the violin, allowing students to experience the initial auditory perceptions brought by different instrument timbres. Subsequently, students can assess the mood and tempo of the pieces based on their fundamental musical elements, thereby understanding the diverse emotional experiences these elements offer. While imparting basic musical knowledge, music teachers should subtly instill in students an appreciation for the roles and charms of these musical elements, sparking their interest in the components of musical works and guiding them to actively explore the characteristics of each element and their extended musical implications, thereby enhancing their musical appreciation abilities..

3. The Cultivation of Musical Visual Sense Ability

3.1 Synesthetic Effect

Synesthesia is a psychological phenomenon where a sensory stimulus triggers responses in other senses. For instance, consider two different colors of paint used to decorate two rooms, one for winter and the other for summer. Red paint is commonly associated with warmth and is thus suitable for the winter room; whereas light blue is often perceived as cool and is appropriate for the summer room. This choice is based on the tactile sensations evoked by visual stimuli. Similarly, when we see a clear stream and towering mountains, we naturally associate the stream with high-pitched melodies and the mountains with low-pitched ones, demonstrating synesthetic responses where auditory stimuli trigger visual mental activities.

In the application of synesthesia, it is crucial to maintain the essence of coherence while allowing for flexibility. This means that when listening to a musical piece, the correspondences in synesthesia should remain consistent. Although different individuals may have varying emotional interpretations of the same piece, as Shakespeare put it, "there are as many Hamlets as there are readers," musicians' interpretations of the same piece can also differ. For example, different renditions of "Turkish March" reflect each musician's personal feelings, yet the overall content remains unchanged. The consistency here refers to the unity of synesthetic content, while the expression of the piece's emotional and intellectual ideas can vary according to personal inner feelings. For instance, when a teacher plays high notes, students mimic the actions of a bird; when playing low notes, students imitate the walking of an elephant. This consistent correspondence is what students need to grasp.

To fully harness the power of synesthesia in appreciating music, it is essential to engage all of a student's sensory organs, including hearing, sight, perception, and feeling. By linking musical elements with students' life experiences, students progress from sensation to perception, achieving an understanding of the strength and pitch of sounds; from vision to hearing, they gain insights into the melody's undulation, timbre, and mood. This process leverages the synesthetic effects of music.

3.2 Aesthetic Ability

Firstly, it is essential to enhance students' intrinsic emotional experiences by establishing a synesthetic mechanism in their emotions. Music, often referred to as the "art of emotion," typically constructs its narrative, lyricism, and dramatic effects through emotional expression. This emotional conveyance relies on the interplay of musical elements such as melody, tempo, dynamics, rhythm, and harmony. The intricate weaving and blending of these elements stimulate acute synesthetic responses, thereby eliciting emotional resonance during the process of musical appreciation. It is noteworthy that this synesthetic ability is not inherently linked to an individual's innate conditions, a point vividly illustrated by Beethoven's example. Despite his deafness, he was able to compose the world-shaking "Ninth Symphony," primarily due to his powerful emotional drive that fueled his synesthetic capabilities.

Additionally, it is crucial to stimulate students' audiovisual synesthetic abilities. Audiovisual synesthesia involves the interaction between hearing and sight, where auditory experiences can evoke

visual sensations and vice versa. For instance, elements such as pitch, dynamics, tempo, and rhythm in music can trigger corresponding synesthetic reactions with visual imagery.

In conclusion, enhancing musical synesthetic abilities is a pivotal step in cultivating musical aesthetic skills. By integrating emotional synesthesia, imagery synesthesia, and audiovisual synesthesia, one can effectively strengthen aesthetic synesthetic abilities, consolidate the learning of musical knowledge and skills, enrich students' emotional depth, and lay a solid foundation for enhancing their aesthetic capabilities.

4. The Cultivation of Musical Appreciation

4.1 The Symbolic Function of Timbre

In the perception of timbre in musical compositions, the initial sensory input is received through auditory perception, which is then processed by the brain to form judgments about the timbre. This process is a synthesis of innate physiological responses and acquired auditory experiences. The enhancement we seek primarily involves the development of our acquired auditory skills. By cultivating these skills through practices such as sight-singing and ear training, we aim to refine our ability to discern timbres. Sight-singing and ear training, as the name suggests, combine the practices of sight-singing with ear training, systematically enhancing students' sensitivity to musical notes. Prior to sight-singing, exercises such as imitating scales and constructing intervals can be employed to consciously grasp the precise pitch locations. This is achieved through progressive steps involving individual notes, note groups, intervals, and chords, culminating in ear training exercises that further solidify the mental framework for timbre through variations in volume, pitch, and pattern.

Moreover, a keen sense of timbre appreciation and understanding is essential. Different timbres evoke distinct musical expressions. When listening to musical works, educators should integrate elements such as melody, rhythm, tempo, and dynamics to guide students in comparing and contrasting the timbres within the compositions through experiential learning. For instance, in the violin concerto "Butterfly Lovers," the composer utilizes the violin's timbre to depict Zhu Yingtai's theme, while Liang Shanbo's theme is portrayed with the cello, effectively highlighting the most appropriate timbres. Substituting these with other instruments would compromise the authentic emotional expression of the music. Thus, a correct understanding of timbre allows for the accurate portrayal of musical emotions, transforming timbre into a "symbol" that serves as a conduit for emotional expression or as a means to evoke. By mastering timbres, students can better comprehend musical works, thereby enhancing their musical appreciation abilities.

4.2 Enrich Music Culture Connotation

Music, an ancient art form, has been refined over nearly eight millennia, from the pre-Qin period to the present, constructing a rich and diverse musical culture of the Chinese nation. Broadly defined, culture is the accumulation of life experiences and knowledge that humans have gathered throughout history, succinctly referred to as "humanistic education." As a manifestation of culture, music not only reflects

the spiritual and cultural needs of people in different regions but also maintains an inseparable connection with culture. Structurally, music is a significant component of culture, while culture permeates music. In terms of expression, culture conveys messages and cultural ideas through music, a non-material and non-concrete form.

Taking the traditional pipa piece "Spring River Flower Moon Night" as an example, this composition, adapted by a composer from Zhang Ruoxu's seven-syllable long poem of the Tang dynasty, exemplifies the deep integration of culture and music. To truly understand and appreciate music, a grasp of cultural context is essential. A person with profound musical sensitivity inevitably possesses a deep cultural foundation, with each interpretation of music revealing their cultural literacy, which is also a crucial way to enhance musical appreciation.

The characteristics of music are often influenced by cultural literacy. To deeply understand a musical piece, it is necessary to know the composer's background and the related content of the work. However, traditional music education often overemphasizes the training of knowledge and skills, neglecting the emotional essence of music. Therefore, music requires humanistic interpretation and explanation.

Recalling a story, the world-renowned violin maestro Enescu emphasized the importance of cultural foundation in teaching piano skills. A violinist sought his advice, but before showcasing their skills, the maestro inquired about Dante's "Divine Comedy" and Goethe's poetry, highlighting the importance of cultural knowledge in understanding the emotional aspects of music. This story profoundly illustrates that mere technical proficiency in music is insufficient; a deep cultural foundation is key to understanding the emotional depth of music, reflecting how culture enhances musical experience.

5. The Combination of Music Aesthetics and Drama Dance

5.1 Related Art Connections

In the practice of music education, employing methods that involve students in mimicking ethnic dance movements not only stimulates their interest in music but also deepens their comprehension of musical works. For instance, when teaching "Yi Dance" from the People's Music Edition for Grade 7, Volume 1, teachers can guide students to create dance movements based on the music's style and melody during their initial listening. After the music concludes, the teacher can introduce the local characteristics of the Yi ethnic group and demonstrate related Yi dances, allowing students to mimic these and compare them with their previously created movements, thereby identifying and summarizing the key features of Yi dance. Additionally, teachers can enhance students' understanding by showing videos that visually and aurally depict the integration of dance and music, as well as the graceful movements and postures exhibited in the dance. For example, teachers might show excerpts from the large-scale dance poem drama "Only This Green" featured in the Spring Festival Gala, which is based on Wang Ximeng's "A Thousand Li of Rivers and Mountains" from the Song Dynasty. Through the element of "green," the drama showcases the delicacy and breadth of ancient dance and Song Dynasty aesthetics. By observing the dance forms and the dancers' "green waist" postures, students can perceive the leisurely state of the

Song people and the dancers' techniques of combining strength with flexibility, steadiness like a rock, and resilience like reed, all of which subtly narrate the cultural heritage of China over five thousand years. By watching these videos, students can gain a deeper understanding of dance, experience the impact of music, and thus enhance their aesthetic abilities.

Music, as a unique field of art, exists not only independently but is also closely linked with other sister arts. By drawing on the rich cultural and artistic heritage and integrating various art forms, students' aesthetic abilities can be enhanced, guiding them to perceive, experience, and understand art in aesthetic practices, fostering a comprehensive knowledge perspective, and promoting the holistic and coordinated development of students. This approach fully leverages the role of art education in cultivating aesthetic appreciation and truly realizes the comprehensive educational function of music.

5.2 Musical Aesthetic Emotion

Emotion is a unique psychological experience, originating from an individual's emotional response to the current situation. Each person's emotional reactions vary, and the same event may not evoke emotional fluctuations in everyone. In the realm of musical aesthetic emotion, this emotion is deepened through the experience of musical activities, resonating within the individual's heart. Through the interplay of aesthetic perception, imagination, and understanding, various levels of aesthetic competence are ultimately formed. Applying this competence to music allows for a deeper emotional understanding of the work, with the more genuine and profound the emotion, the better the aesthetic effect. Therefore, aesthetic emotion is regarded as a form of advanced emotion.

In music education, how teachers guide students to experience musical emotions to enhance aesthetic appreciation is a crucial issue. Music teaching often employs experiential methods, allowing students to directly feel the emotional content of the music through imitation or teacher performances. Additionally, by narrating the background stories of the works, students can gain a deeper understanding of the pieces, achieving the goals of emotional engagement and aesthetic education. Teachers should seize the emotional resonance points with students, apply emotional principles, ignite their emotional sparks, and enable them to enjoy the beauty of the musical works.

The emotion presented by music is essentially a form of beauty, and compared to everyday emotions, the emotions in musical works may be more intense, delicate, or obscure. Therefore, music teachers must first enhance themselves by studying the history of Chinese and Western music and regional music, listening to music pieces of different styles and types, to improve their overall capabilities.

6. Conclusion

Based on the author's practical teaching experiences, this article unveils the issue of insufficient aesthetic capabilities among students. To address this, the author conducted a questionnaire survey among students at a middle school, combined with classroom observations, to explore the reasons behind the lack of aesthetic abilities. Through a comprehensive analysis of the school, teachers, and students, the urgency of cultivating students' aesthetic capabilities has been deeply recognized. The aim

is to enhance students' aesthetic abilities, enabling them to more profoundly experience the emotions in artistic works, appreciate and understand music, and guide students in actively engaging in healthy aesthetic practices to perceive and experience art. Aesthetic education demonstrates its indispensable role and value in fostering students' aesthetic and humanistic qualities. Under the guidance of mentors, the author reviewed books and extensive literature in the fields of musicology, pedagogy, and aesthetics, and integrated the educational philosophy of the "2022 Edition of the New Curriculum Standards" to systematically construct a strategic framework for cultivating the aesthetic abilities of middle school students.

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