

# The Importance and Challenges of Implementing Multicultural Music Education in a Music Classroom at International Schools in Bangkok, Thailand

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## Abstract

In a globalized culture, the need to embrace and teach multicultural music is of higher importance than ever. International schools are becoming more diverse and are in high demand. In a diverse city like Bangkok, we have to emphasize bringing diversity in music in order to represent the cultures at the same time allow the learners to be educated on the history and the importance of cultures. The purpose of the study was to investigate the experiences and challenges of teachers teaching in international schools in Bangkok, Thailand and to envision ways to deal with these challenges and recommend teaching strategies. A qualitative case study was applied in order to examine the purpose of the study. The results of the research showed that all three participants regarded multicultural music education as extremely important. They also encountered challenges teaching in diverse classrooms, and they had implemented several teaching strategies to deal with their challenges. Several teaching strategies have also been recommended by the researcher. This research is intended to help future researchers to understand the importance and the impact of multicultural music education and at the same time provide an understanding of the experiences and challenges of multicultural music educators teaching in similar surroundings or conditions. This research can be used as an aid in developing more teaching strategies and ways to overcome challenges encountered by multicultural music teachers.

**Keywords :** globalized culture, multicultural music education, diversity

## Introduction

Music is an integral part of a community, its culture and the role it plays to express and tell the story of the people. Levitin (2006) states, “Whenever humans come together for any reason, music is there. Weddings, funerals, graduation from college, men marching off to war, stadium sporting events, a night on the town, prayer, a romantic diner, mother rocking their infants to sleep and college students studying with music as a background...” Music has always been closely associated with culture. Music is such an effective tool that when it is put in a situation or a space, it has the ability to attract and draw people together regardless of age, race, religion, or even of different political stands. Such is the power and importance of music that it can be a lullaby (gentle and heartwarming message) but at the same time it can also be a strong voice with a message of hope, strength, love, and unity for the world. Rachiotis (2014) states that for that reason, music can easily be used as an instrument of peace when there is chaos between people of different origins and backgrounds. It is an interesting and creative way to communicate with people we know as well as with people we do not. Music has the capacity to bond people globally.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we can see a rapid growth of diversity in every system of business, management, art, etc. Thus increased diversity encourages globalization and brings in nationalities from different countries to come to Thailand. Bangkok, being the capital of the nation carries a huge responsibility to pave the way in the field of diversity. With the increasing number of students from diverse backgrounds entering international schools and colleges in Bangkok, the classrooms are becoming extremely diverse, propelling the need for multicultural music education. Hao (1997) states that globalization and increased diversity within student populations have contributed to the increasing demand for a multicultural approach to music education in today’s schools. This research hopes to address the importance of realizing the multicultural diversity in Bangkok, the challenges that are being faced in multicultural classroom setting and how the educational institutes should be prepared to embrace diversity but at the same time know how to equip the educators in order to best facilitate the learners.

### Objective of the Study

1. To investigate the experiences of teachers teaching in a music classroom in international schools in Bangkok, Thailand, where the students come from wide variety of cultural backgrounds.
2. To analyze the challenges of teaching multicultural music education to students at international schools in Bangkok, Thailand.
3. To envision ways to deal with these challenges and recommend teaching strategies.

## Literature Review

### 1. The Role of Music Education in a Globalized World

Music education in our time faces many challenges that can be related to the contemporary condition of globalization and its dynamics. Papageorgiou & Koutrouba (2014) states, “Globalization, the vast increase in intercultural communication and interaction, and the cultural diversity in today’s classrooms create a demand for a new orientation in education and the implementation of school programs that will adopt global perspectives and promote intercultural understanding and respect.” According to Ho & Law (2009), “in this era of increased globalization the concept of national culture is problematic because globalization has posed challenges to the cultural identities of people’s in different parts of the world.” Wallace & Athamesara (2004) state that many Thais have been feeling that the West and more developed Asian countries, especially Japan, have been exerting so much influence toward globalization that it is time to begin saving Thai culture from extinction. Efforts must be made to preserve one’s culture and that is what Thailand is trying to do by opening various Thai Studies Programs and Centers at most major universities. They also observe festival parades, which includes music, food, wearing historical local dress, and drama. These are some of the ways Thai people are trying to preserve their tradition from extinction.

While globalization brings in new discoveries and developments in a country, it also has its own disadvantages, especially in terms of posing challenges to the national identity and people’s culture. Based on the research work of (Tomlinson, 1999), Ho & Law (2009) suggest that as many young people struggle to become citizens of a global culture, they become culturally disoriented, and the differences between locality-defined cultures, which had constituted people’s identities before, become increasingly blurred. When young people experience globalization, they tend to lose their cultural identity because they are basically at a period where they are trying to find their own identity. They are at a very sensitive stage where they receive, accept and learn everything they see, making them confused and disoriented about their true cultural identity. But what multicultural music education does is it helps individuals learn about different culture while helping them stay true to their own cultural identity. Globalization also causes educational systems to change time and again. Based on the research of (Gardner, 1999), Ho & Law (2009) suggest that education changes overtime in association with shifts in values and scientific findings, as well as with broader historical and social forces such as globalization. Multicultural music education, as defined in the earlier chapter, not only helps students identify their cultural identity but also their global identity. With the world becoming hugely globalized,

educators are seeing and realizing the importance of implementing multicultural music education into music curriculums. Nethsinghe (2012) states that teaching multicultural music in school classrooms has become increasingly popular in many countries of the world.

Joseph (2007) claims, “Music education is an effective medium to foster intercultural engagement by teachers, their students, and the community in a multicultural, multifaith, multiracial and multilinguistic society promoting understanding of difference and diversity.” He further emphasizes that educators need to walk alongside each other and keep up with the changes and development in education reform in order to impart knowledge for the ‘other’ and teach about ‘the other’. Folkestad (2005) states, “As a result of the globalized world in which the local and the global interact, particularly in the music learning of young people, music education researchers need to be everywhere, focusing not only on the formal and informal musical learning in Western societies and cultures, but to include the full global range of popular, world and indigenous music in their studies.”

## **2. Importance of Multicultural Music Education**

Banks (2007) claims, “Multicultural education incorporates the idea that all students regardless of their gender and social class and their ethnic, racial or cultural characteristics should have an equal opportunity to learn in school.” Every student has the equal right and opportunity to study music. That is one of the important ideas that multicultural music education focuses on. Based on the research of (Chen–Hafteck 2007), Nethsinghe (2012) states “an in–depth study of an unfamiliar culture brings novelty to classroom subject matter and motivates learning” and music education has been identified as one of the most effective subjects in this process. Learning about multicultural music education makes an individual more aware about the outside culture other than its own. It is important to embrace diversity and promote human dignity, which is exactly what multicultural music education does. Bartolome (2013) states, “by including a variety of world musical cultures in our curricula, we affirm to students that diversity is valued and broaden their perspectives of music as universal, human phenomena.” Educators must recognize the importance of teaching musical cultures of the world apart from the western contemporary and western classical genres. Equal importance should be given to every genre as it will reduce the changes in the relationship between cultures and human identity that globalization brings. Learning about the music of world cultures will educate learners to accept every diverse individual they way they are. In the future, if multicultural music education is taken seriously and implemented in every music schools, we will see a huge difference in world peace, unity, and acceptance.

### **3. Challenges of Teaching Multicultural Music Education**

According to Papageorgiou & Koutrouba (2014) one of the aspects that pose a challenge for multicultural music teachers is that though teachers try and introduce different diverse world music, a lot of times they are not effective because they lack proper teaching techniques and activities. Based on the research of (Paterno 2001), Southcott & Joseph (2007) state that customs and behavior of culture can be easily learned and practiced, however values, attitudes, and beliefs take time to understand and requires a deeper and more fundamental awareness. According to Franklin (2001), Elise Trumbull, a senior research associate for the Culture and Language Program states, “It’s almost impossible for teachers to respond in culturally appropriate or sensitive ways to all the cultures they have in the classrooms.”

Abdullah (2009) explains one of the challenges by stating that inappropriate use of resources and materials without understanding their true meaning and significance of the values and beliefs does not bring about any learning that is useful. The author further states that resources and materials are extremely important for educating the students. But in order to best communicate that, the person delivering it, which is the teacher plays the most important role.

Another challenge is keeping the authenticity of the culture while teaching multicultural music. Kang (2016) states that authenticity is important when teaching music from around the world to reflect stylistic differences of music from various cultures. Blair & Kondo (2008) recognize the importance of authenticity in teaching multicultural music by answering the question, “when teaching music of one culture to members of another, whose culture should be honored?” they indicate that “teaching practices must be authentic to the people whose music we are teaching, but it is also important that it be authentic to the students we are teaching.”

### **4. Multicultural Music Education in Thailand Then and Now**

Miranti (2009) states that western music was introduced to Thailand around 1900 and it soon became a fashionable music trend but it overshadowed Thai traditional music to some extent. Kislenco (2004) describes how Thai musicians, fearing the extinction of their native music, created a unique scale of music setting it apart from any other system. However, Western classical music was still welcomed and it slowly built its foundation in the country through orchestras and education programs. Williams & Trakarnrung (2015) state, “In this era of global communication and cross-cultural interactions, there is an increasing need to broaden the knowledge base of music education by illuminating similarities and differences in music education approaches from seemingly

different and distant cultures such as Thailand and the US.” Williams & Trakarnrung (2015) claim, “there is very little extant literature on the educational structure or pedagogy of Thai schools and even less on music education.” Tanwinit & Sittiprapaporn (2010) states that one of the challenges that most music educators in Thailand today face is “improving the level of music student satisfaction with the curriculum and learning environment.” They also indicate that educators find it challenging to meet the needs of every student. Music educators need to overcome the tendency that all students should be treated in a similar way and look for methods and ways for teaching culturally diverse students by developing appropriate learning opportunities in order to make learning experience more productive.

### **5. International Schools in Bangkok, Thailand**

Thailand International schools are defined by the Ministry of Education (2003), as follows: “An international school is an educational institution providing an international curriculum or international curriculum which its subject’s detail has been adjusted or a self-organization curriculum, which is not the Ministry of Education’s. A foreign language is used as the medium of teaching and learning and students are enrolled without restriction or limitation on nationality or religion or government regime, and are not against the morality or stability of Thailand.”

Werner (2010) explains that none of the international schools in Bangkok and Thailand are really foreign schools since the Ministry of Education in Thailand accredits all the schools. Therefore, according to the legal process, all the international schools are Thai schools. According to Ministry of Education (2003), Thai language and culture constitutes a core subject and is mandatory at every level for all students; Thai students are required to study at least five 50 minutes periods a week, while non-Thai students must receive a minimum of instruction of one period per week. International schools in Thailand can follow an international curriculum or a curriculum set by the school. International schools in Bangkok usually follow the American or British curriculum and style. Werner (2010) states that other foreign curricula from Singapore, Switzerland, Germany, Australia etc. are also applied in the international schools.

Cleesuntorn (2013) describes that during the last 20 years, international schools have been established for children of foreigners who work in Thailand and indicates that from 5 schools initially, the total number is now grown to 200 of which almost 100 schools are located in Bangkok. One extremely interesting and important information from Cleesuntorn’s (2013) research was that students in these schools which follow different mediums of instruction such as English, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Indian were also encouraged to practice their own culture and beliefs. Along with that, “they were expected to understand and practice Thai culture to a certain degree.”

## **Methodology**

### **Participants**

The participants in the research that were selected met all the following criteria:

1. The schools are international schools and classes are taught in English.
2. All the participants are teachers teaching in three different international schools.
3. The participants have completed a Bachelor of Music degree.
4. The participants have been teaching music in their school for minimum 1 year.
5. Their students come from culturally diverse backgrounds.

The participants were selected from three different international schools in Bangkok. First, all international schools in Bangkok were listed out. Then the next step was to make a list of schools that had cultural diversity and gave importance to multicultural music education. Then emails were sent out to those schools along with criteria's and requirements. And then three schools that met all the requirements responded willing to participate.

To maintain privacy, names of the teachers as well the names of the schools have been omitted from this research. Thus, all names have been changed to protect participant confidentiality and have been referred to as Teacher 1, Teacher 2, and Teacher 3.

### **Research Instruments**

Case study design has been used for interviewing (semi-structured interview) three music teachers along with classroom observation (non-participant observation). Observations (non-participant observation) were conducted three times for each participant in their classrooms. Data collected through observation has been considered highly accurate and also reliable. In order to support the observation, interviews (semi-structured interviews) were carried out in order to gain insights into the experience of the participants. Conducting semi-structured interview allowed the participants the freedom to express their views in their own terms, which gave the researcher the opportunity for identifying new ways of seeing and understanding the topic, while still being able to follow the interview guide.

### **Data Collection**

The researcher collected data through interviews and observation. Interviews were conducted at the participants' school. Observations were carried out at the participants' respective classrooms, attending three classes of every participant. Field notes were taken throughout the observations and were focused on what was seen as well as determining what the observed events might mean in order to provide help with the research questions during data analysis.

## **Data Analysis**

This case study qualitative research used descriptive and content analysis as a means of data analysis. After the data was collected, the researcher compiled the data from the logbook, audio recorder and the field notes to organize the data. Interpretation of the teaching behavior and students' actions were observed and each data item were analyzed. Content analysis helped to discover and understand the big picture by classifying and summarizing the data collected.

## **Results**

### **1. Importance of Multicultural Music Education**

All three participants regard multicultural music education extremely important. They believe that multicultural music education creates cultural awareness, creates diverse learning, broadens the students' learning of the world, and embrace people from different walks of life. Teacher 1 believes that incorporating multicultural music teaching especially in a diverse classroom could bring in a lot of benefits. She is convinced that by doing so it will broaden the minds and knowledge of the students in creating a sense of connection, acceptance and respect for their fellow classmates from different cultural backgrounds as well as towards people outside of classroom. Teacher 2 believes that through learning of different cultural music and their culture, it creates passion to learn more about different cultures, their instruments and the people. For her it is much more than just learning the music. It is also about how to encourage and help the students to embrace diversity and acceptance. Teacher 3 also believes that multicultural music education can build relationships and develop friendships.

### **2. Challenges of Teaching Multicultural Music Education**

The participants face challenges in their day to day teaching experience. They mentioned how cultural sensitivity and language barrier can hamper their teaching because when one is not aware of their students' background, lifestyle, beliefs etc, then that could be a barrier between them and their students and effect their relationship, which could have a big impact on their teaching and learning process and also cause a negative impact in the long run. According to Teacher 1, "I struggle when I don't know much about their culture. There can be lyrics in songs from one culture that sound like inappropriate words to someone from another culture, this has caused unexpected reactions that have to be addressed." Teacher 3 also finds cultural sensitivity challenging because what is acceptable in one culture can be unacceptable or not polite for another culture.

She mentioned that for some students coming from different cultural backgrounds, it made them uncomfortable when she wrote the names of those students on white board and they thought it was rude for her to do so. Two of the participants, teacher 1 and teacher 2 found that most of the students valued different cultural music in a different way. Because some cultural music is complicated and difficult to learn, this makes the students not willing to participate or pay attention leading them to give up, especially in the beginning. Language barrier seemed to be a challenge for teacher 1 and teacher 3. For most students coming from countries whose English is not their first language had problems understanding and communicating in the classroom, which was challenging for their teachers.

### **3. Teaching strategies**

#### **3.1 Interaction and Not Lecture Based Teaching**

One of the most common strategies that all the three participants applied was interaction based teaching and not lecture based. Teacher 1's classroom seating arrangement in one of her classes was in a semi circle position in order to make it easier for the students to observe each other as they played the music and the teacher could also easily watch and interact with all the students. According to McCroskey & McVetta (1978) semi-circle seating arrangement works best for student-student and student-teacher interaction. Teacher 1 believes that interacting with each other provokes thoughts, ideas, and expands conversation, which creates a good learning experience with each other and especially it is helpful because it slowly breaks uncomfortable barriers among students and teachers.

#### **3.2 Apply a Variety of Learning Activities and Practical Based Lessons**

One of the teaching strategies that Teacher 1 implemented was including a variety of learning activities. Other than verbal teaching, she used different activities and tools like cups, picture cards, dance etc. to help the students understand and learn the subject. Teacher 2's second day of teaching was more practical-based than the first day of the observation. The quiet South East Asian boy who kept to himself most of the time on the first day seemed exceedingly energetic and responsive on the second day when the teacher applied practical based lessons that included activities. His behavior changed from being quiet and responsive to being interactive and contributing to the class. Teacher 2 tries to make her classes practical-based and include various learning activities, where the students are more engaged and perform or compose music from different countries. That way the students also get to mingle, interact and work with

each other. Based on the research findings of (Mumford 1984), Bell–Mcroy (2014) states, “findings showed that exposure to ethnic and popular music proved more effective than lectures and readings in producing positive attitudinal change.”

### **3.3 Provide Independent Practice and Thinking**

Teacher 2 believe that giving students the independence to do their own research, class work, practice, etc leads students to trigger their own creative ideas and also creates a sense of responsibility among themselves. In one of her classes she paired the students in twos and threes and gave access to one practice room for each group to compose their own music and lyrics. This kind of teaching strategy not only helps students to generate their own creative ideas but it also creates a sense of responsibility among each one of them.

### **3.4 Communicate Expectations and Provide Frequent Reviews of the Content Learned**

Teacher 3 prefers to give an overview of the culture of the country first and only then play the piece. This is a great way of preparing the students of what they are going to be listening to. Before the class starts, Teacher 3 makes sure to go through the musical piece they have learned in the previous class. She also reviews the students’ performance by allowing the students to practice for few minutes so that they are properly equipped with the piece that they have learned in the previous class. After teaching new musical piece, she assesses the students’ learning by sometimes calling them to the front to perform. Reviewing what they have learned helps the students to know where they need to improve and also what they are doing right.

### **3.5 Recognize Language Barriers and Implement Different Approaches to Help the Students**

When faced with language barrier in her class, Teacher 1 states, “I have had many situations with students whose English skills are weak. Usually I will pick another student to be their buddy and help them know what to do, or I will make sure they sit close to me so I can check for understanding throughout the lesson. If these two things do not work, I have had times where I have pulled a student out from another class to spend some time showing them expectations one–on–one.” Teacher 2 has not faced such problem so far. But in future if she does, she says that she would make sure that they fully understand the tasks they need to complete by approaching them first as the rest of the class begins the task given. According to Teacher 2, “I would also demonstrate the expected outcome of each task to them, especially if the task is practical-based. Allowing the students whose English skills are weak to work in pairs/groups with others that are strong in English also helps.” Teacher 3 usually shows them physically how to do things by speaking very slowly,

giving one to one help, and pairing them up. With written work, she does EAL (English as a second language) sheet so it's easier for them to understand.

### **3.6 Incorporate Objectives for Affective & Personal Development**

Teacher 3 while disciplining her students made sure that she also incorporated life values in her students. When students were getting distracted and causing disturbance to other students, she would approach them and instead of asking him/her why they were behaving that way, she would gently ask them about their work progress and allow other students to comment on his work and vice versa. Teacher 3 in the end would comment on the areas where they have impressed her and the areas where they need to improve. This approach by the teacher encouraged the students and created a positive relationship between them and it also built a sense of responsibility in the students. Diverse culture brings in diverse mindset, communication, learning modalities, social development etc. So, when the teachers give the student the opportunity to open up to give their input and suggestions, it makes the student feel appreciated and respected also allowing the teacher to understand the student better.

## **Discussion**

### *Discussion and Recommendation*

Multicultural music teaching is extremely important because it creates cultural awareness, diverse learning, broadens the students' knowledge of the world and how they view it making them compassionate, and accepting of people from different culture and background. It helps the students to be more open to learn and to embrace people from different walks of life. Interactive based teaching seemed to be popular among all the three participants. They applied this strategy while teaching their diverse classroom and that encouraged the students to open up with ease, which in turn helped the teacher to understand them better. It allowed the students to interact with their fellow classmates, which helped them to bond and connect with each other. A lot of physical activities were implemented in Teacher 1 and teacher 2's classes. While performing these activities, the students got to mingle, interact and engage with each other. Similar to interaction based class, physical activities also helped the students to step out of their comfort zone and lead them to start interacting with their fellow classmates. It also made the students feel like they were a part of the learning experience because they got to be involved in the activities. And it created a healthy environment for the students to bond. Implementing life lessons and not just the curriculum was one of the teaching strategies that Teacher 3 applied. Through this method, it helped the students build better attitude

and responsibility. Applying it in the classroom encouraged the students and gave them opportunities to contribute their thoughts and comments on the lesson. Implementing values of life will mold the students to become better and responsible individuals because education without any life lessons will leave an individual lacking to best implement his knowledge.

#### *Recommended Teaching Strategies*

Here are some additional teaching strategies that the researcher recommends that can be implemented in multicultural music teaching. These strategies are also recommended and supported by different researchers like Kang (2016), Blair & Kondo (2008), and Nethsinghe (2013).

When a cultural music is being introduced and taught, it will be effective if guests' musicians or music teachers from that particular culture are invited to teach their cultural music and maintain authenticity, or have students from that particular culture to share about his/her cultural music, which they are learning. Another effective way of educating the students could be to take them to different cultural centers or cultural music events in order to educate them with the culture and its music. This will especially help in teaching the students the authenticity of the culture and what and who the music represents. It is important to create a cultural experience of that particular cultural music. So, in order to help the learning to be more effective, a cultural experience can be created.

For example; if the lesson is about Indian Instrument 'Sitar', the teacher can invite a guest teacher belonging to Indian culture. And in order to create a cultural experience on Indian music, the teacher can also introduce the authentic class set up of Indian culture by making small changes like letting the students sit on the floor instead of chairs, encouraging the students to bring an item that represents India, or giving small Indian sweets or snacks as treats. This will help the students to get a feel of the culture and also get into a mode of learning about that culture.

It is also important that the teaching remains authentic when a cultural music of the students' culture is being taught. Blair & Kondo (2008) states that when the cultural context of the music is removed from the cultural experiences of the learners, it makes it difficult for the learners to make meaningful connections to the new experience. When a cultural music is taught, and performed the way it is learned and performed in the culture, and there are students who are from the same culture, it creates a connection between the student and the lesson and also, a great reminder of their history and who they are.

## **Benefits of the study**

The benefit of the effective teaching strategies of the participants in this research is that the strategies could be applied not only in multicultural music teachings, but also in different teaching situations. It is very common that students behave or respond similarly, whether it is in a multicultural music studies or a different context. So, the strategies that are used by the participants in this research can be also applied in different subject studies.

## **Conclusion**

Through participation, sharing, and cooperation, music connects children with other members of their culture and the greater society. Students have different perspectives on life and in the class it is important for teachers to understand that and help students respect each other's culture. With the increasing number of students from diverse backgrounds entering international schools and colleges in Bangkok, the classrooms are becoming extremely diverse, which propels the need for multicultural music education. It is important to understand the variety of differences that is brought into one school or class for that matter and the cultures and backgrounds that are explored. Different group of people may have different communication styles and so understanding student communication styles could be very challenging. If all children are going to reach their full potential, teachers must be sensitive to and familiar with the diverse needs of the children. The challenges and the issues faced in such situation must be brought out for people especially educators to see and recognize, so that they understand that they are not alone and it is a common issue which can be discussed and learn through the challenges. Therefore, teachers should learn and equip themselves on how to work in a culturally diverse classroom if they want their work to be effective and beneficial to the learner and the community in general. Taking into account all of the above, this study explored the views and teachings of International school music teachers teaching culturally diverse students.

The findings indicate that multicultural music education is indeed important and crucial in a culturally diverse classroom. Teachers teaching in such environment face challenges in their day to day teaching experience. Multicultural music teaching is not just about the knowledge of music but knowledge on culture also plays a very important role. As Lortat-Jacob (2006) puts it, "You're not only producing notes and melodies, rather you are learning of people's lives, their history and culture." A teacher has to be culturally sensitive and at least have a certain amount of cultural knowledge in order to best communicate with their students and to build effective relationships. The teacher should continue to experiment and try different exercises and teaching strategies that will help

them to be more effective in their teaching. The teacher should mix their teaching strategies and activities because different strategies and exercises may best suit different students. The school should also play its role by recognizing the needs and trying their best to equip and support the teacher with resources they need.

Diversity is a beautiful thing in every aspect. And when an institute/community /individual embraces and encourages diversity, it only expands knowledge through different aspects. Of course, it will have its own share of challenges but also the success it brings will have a greater impact on the school and most importantly the children. So, while we celebrate success, challenges should also be recognized and solved but at the same time continually pursue for excellence.

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