Proceedings of ICEIPI 2025 Symposium: Understanding Religious Identity in Educational Contexts
DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2025.ND25685

Exploring the Educational Value of School Music Courses in Supporting Psychological Wellbeing and Emotional Growth

Yijie Chen

University of Birmingham, Birmingham, United Kingdom
Yijiechen23@163.com

Abstract. Adolescent mental health challenges such as anxiety, depression, and mood disorders have become increasingly prevalent worldwide, highlighting the urgent need for school-based emotional support. While traditional mental health education in schools tends to rely on external interventions such as counseling and crisis response, the psychological potential of regular curricular content, particularly music, is often overlooked. This study explores how music education in primary and secondary schools can serve as a meaningful form of emotional support, fostering students' emotional development and psychological well-being. Grounded in theories of music psychology and educational psychology, the research examines the mechanisms through which music influences emotional states and conducts a comparative analysis of school music programs in China and the United Kingdom. The findings reveal that music education offers significant benefits beyond technical skill development, including emotional expression, stress reduction, attention regulation, and social bonding. While the United Kingdom has integrated mental health objectives systematically into its music curriculum, China continues to emphasize skill training and cultural heritage, with less attention to psychological support. This contrast illustrates the potential for Chinese education to enhance the emotional functions of music through curriculum reform, teacher training, and policy support. Despite cultural and institutional limitations, the study points to future directions involving empirical evaluation and interdisciplinary collaboration to integrate music more effectively into mental health promotion in schools.

Keywords: Music education, Adolescent mental health, Emotional development, Music psychology, Comparative education

1. Introduction

In recent years, psychological problems such as mood disorders, anxiety, and depression among adolescents have become increasingly serious, becoming a common challenge facing the global education field. The World Health Organization pointed out that about 10% to 20% of children and adolescents in the world have mental health problems, but most of them fail to receive timely help or treatment [1]. A survey of middle school students aged 11 to 20 showed that nearly 20% of middle school students suffered from depression and even suicidal behavior [2]. This trend highlights the practical urgency of school education in supporting mental health. In particular, with

© 2026 The Authors. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License 4.0 (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2025.ND25685

the advancement of the concept of "whole-person education", schools are no longer just places for imparting knowledge, but are gradually given the functions of psychological support and emotional nourishment [3]. However, at present, school mental health education still mainly relies on external mechanisms such as psychological counseling, assessment, and crisis intervention, while the potential support value of the curriculum itself is often overlooked.

Art therapy has gradually attracted attention and become an important bridge connecting education and psychological support. Music, as one of the most emotionally resonant forms of art, possesses a uniquely powerful function in psychological regulation. Studies have shown that music can not only evoke emotional experience, but also promote emotional expression, release stress and build self-identity. Although "music therapy" has been widely used in the field of clinical psychology, there is still a lack of systematic discussion on how music courses can embed psychological support functions in a "non-therapeutic" way in school education contexts. In this context, this paper will use the theoretical framework of music psychology, combined with educational psychology and curriculum research, to explore how music courses can have a positive psychological impact on students through specific psychological mechanisms. Through a comparative analysis of the case studies of music courses in primary and secondary schools in China and the United Kingdom, this paper aims to explore whether music courses can be used as a "soft intervention" model to provide new perspectives and paths for mental health education in daily teaching practice.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Music psychology

Music psychology is an important theoretical basis for music therapy. Its core research is to reveal the relationship between music and human psychology, emotions and behavior. As one of the most mature and widely used branches of art therapy, music therapy is based on the understanding of emotions, perceptions and neural mechanisms in music psychology.

Arousal theory believes that music activates the individual's autonomic nervous system through its structural characteristics (such as rhythm, melody, harmony, etc.) and induces specific emotional states. This theory emphasizes the synchronous activation of music at the physiological and psychological levels and is an important way to understand the effect of music in regulating emotions. It explains why certain music clips can bring strong experiences, such as relaxation, alertness, pleasure or sadness. Studies have found that relaxing music can significantly enhance vagus nerve activity, help relax the body and mind, and even have potential therapeutic effects. In contrast, exciting music (such as heavy metal) can induce high emotional arousal and is associated with higher levels of physiological activation [4].

In addition to its direct arousal effects, music has the capacity to elicit emotional resonance, a psychological synchrony that occurs when individuals emotionally align with the affective content of music during listening or performance [5]. This resonance may involve the activation of mirror neuron systems and social empathy mechanisms, and serves as a core component in many art therapy practices. In educational contexts, it supports emotional expression, enhances students' self-awareness, and promotes stronger emotional connections among teachers, students, and peers.

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2025.ND25685

2.2. Educational psychology and emotional development theory

Emotional development and psychological adaptation are important dimensions that cannot be ignored in the educational process, and music courses, as a highly emotional form of learning, provide a unique educational value foundation for students' emotional growth [6].

The emotional intelligence theory proposed by Goleman emphasizes that the individual's literacy in cognition, expression, emotional regulation and empathy has a decisive influence on their psychological growth and social adaptability. School music courses provide students with specific and diverse "emotional intelligence" practice fields through their rich emotional expression and interactive situations. For example, in the process of ensemble, listening or music creation, students need to identify their own emotions, understand the expression intentions of others, and regulate their own emotional reactions. This process helps to improve students' emotional awareness, empathy and collaborative communication skills, thereby promoting overall social emotional development.

Another key theory comes from Vygotsky's sociocultural theory. According to the theory, cognitive and emotional development does not occur in isolation, but is dynamically constructed through ongoing social interactions and participation in cultural practices [7]. Thus, the social environment exerts a fundamental influence on an individual’s psychological maturation. From this theoretical perspective, music is not only a form of emotional expression, but also a social and cultural intermediary tool. In school education, music activities carry multiple functions such as interpersonal communication, meaning construction and emotional support. Through chorus, interactive performance and collective creation, music courses not only provide students with opportunities to express emotions and achieve socialization, but also help to create a positive learning community and a safe psychological support atmosphere.

3. The impact of music education on students’ emotional and psychological development

Music is one of the most direct art forms for emotional expression, and its structural elements, such as pitch, rhythm, mode and speed, are often naturally interpreted by individuals as specific emotional clues. Studies have shown that the high pitch is often associated with pleasant and light emotions, while the low pitch is more likely to evoke calmness, sadness or tension; fast rhythms and variable time signatures often bring excitement or anxiety, while slow rhythms and regular beats are often associated with relaxation and stability. This connection between sound structure and emotional experience provides students with a perceptible reference for identifying, naming and understanding their own emotions in music. On this basis, school music classes have built a relatively safe and non-judgmental space for emotional expression. Students can externalize their inner emotions through singing and instrumental performance, which not only helps to release repressed emotions, but also improves self-awareness.

In addition to emotion recognition and expression, music also has the potential to regulate attention and enhance cognitive control ability. Attention regulation, as an important part of emotion regulation, directly affects students' learning status and classroom participation. Research has found that certain types of music, such as Baroque music with stable rhythms and simple melodies, can effectively improve students' attention and cognitive regulation abilities, and are particularly suitable for concentration training and emotional stability exercises in the classroom [8]. This type of music is often used in pre-class guidance, writing time, or meditation exercises to help students enter a more relaxed and focused psychological state. Moreover, music activities themselves have structural requirements for attention, such as the "wait-response-synchronization" mechanism in ensembles,

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2025.ND25685

which requires students to simultaneously direct their attention to rhythm, other people's movements, and their own expressions, invisibly training their attention allocation and switching abilities. Therefore, while regulating students' physiological arousal levels, music courses also provide behavioral support paths for students with inattention, anxiety, or emotional disorders through multi-sensory participation and structured activity arrangements.

4. Analysis of music education systems in China and the UK

4.1. Music education structure in China

For many years, music education in China's primary and secondary schools has focused primarily on aesthetic education and technical training, emphasizing proficiency in music theory, vocal performance, and instrumental skills, while placing strong emphasis on the preservation of traditional Chinese music culture and the cultivation of artistic literacy. The "Compulsory Education Art Curriculum Standards" released in 2022 clearly pointed out that students' artistic literacy and appreciation ability should be improved [9]. However, emotional regulation and mental health support have not been systematically integrated in curriculum design and teaching practice. In recent years, the view that art courses should incorporate teaching content on emotional experience and expression to enhance students' social and emotional abilities has gradually been accepted by many regions. Cui pointed out that music has the natural advantage of regulating emotions and relieving psychological pressure [10]. More and more Chinese schools use it as a means of "soft psychological intervention" and embed it into daily teaching and student support systems. For example, in primary school, taking "music and emotions" as the core theme can help students identify and regulate their own emotions. By experiencing music works of different styles, such as the cheerful "Twinkle Twinkle Little Star Variations" and the sad "Erquan Yingyue", students can learn to feel and identify various emotions; in junior high school, the theme of "Music and Emotional Guidance" is especially for students with emotional fluctuations in adolescence [10]. By appreciating excellent classical music works and combining song appreciation with emotional sharing, students' psychological pressure can be effectively relieved and their empathy and interpersonal skills can be cultivated.

4.2. Music education structure in UK

The music curriculum in primary and secondary schools in the UK has long incorporated students' "wellbeing" into the curriculum objectives, emphasizing the promotion of students' emotional expression and psychological growth through "creative music activities". In specific practice, many schools combine music courses with mental health projects to give full play to the role of music therapy. For example, The Roundhouse Cultural Institution in London has developed the "Wellbeing Playlist", a project for middle school students that combines music, body movements and personal social health education (PSHE). Students explore and express their inner emotions by creating "emotional playlists" to enhance their ability to identify and regulate emotions [11]. Such activities not only help students release stress, but also improve their imagination, self-awareness and emotional management skills. Additionally, some school music clubs emphasize teamwork and emotional communication, fostering students' sense of belonging and enhancing their self-esteem. These activities underscore the vital role of music education in supporting students' overall mental health and well-being.

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2025.ND25685

4.3. Comparison analysis

Traditionally, Chinese music courses have focused more on imparting knowledge and cultivating skills, emphasizing basic skills training such as music theory learning, singing and instrumental performance. Although the new curriculum standards in recent years have proposed the goal of promoting students' physical and mental health, in actual teaching, mental health support has not yet formed a systematic curriculum mechanism and evaluation system, and related teacher training and resource allocation are relatively limited, resulting in insufficient functions of music courses in emotional regulation and psychological support.

In contrast, the British music curriculum has included students' physical and mental health as a core teaching goal since its early days, and actively promoted the integration of music art creation and mental health education. The curriculum design encourages students to promote emotional expression and social emotional ability through a variety of creative music activities, such as improvisation, collaborative performance and emotional theme projects. The teacher training and policy support system is relatively complete, and many schools combine music education with mental health projects to form a multi-channel and multi-level emotional support network.

5. Suggestions

School music courses should no longer be seen merely as platforms for talent cultivation or cultural enrichment, but must be recognized as vital channels for promoting students' emotional development and psychological well-being. Music has unique emotional expression and regulation functions, which can provide students with a safe space for emotional catharsis and self-awareness, thereby supporting their emotional growth and psychological resilience.

To realize this transformative potential, education authorities need to prioritize the development of comprehensive art curriculum systems that embed psychological support as a core element. The teaching staff must receive systematic basic training in music psychology to enhance their understanding and sensitivity to the interaction mechanism between music and emotions, and then effectively guide students to express and regulate emotions through music. In addition, music curriculum design should integrate basic emotional regulation skills training, such as music exercises combined with breathing rhythms, structured improvisation, etc., to help students master specific strategies for self-regulation.

Furthermore, the psychological support function of music courses needs to be closely connected with the school's psychological counseling and class teacher care system to build an integrated support system of "course + care". Through the collaboration inside and outside the curriculum, a multi-level and multi-dimensional student psychological support network is formed to enhance the overall mental health education effect of the school and achieve a deep integration of art education and mental health education. Through coordinated efforts within and beyond the classroom, schools can create a holistic environment where music education contributes meaningfully to mental health promotion. This deep integration of arts education and mental health not only enriches the curriculum but also builds a sustainable foundation for nurturing emotionally resilient and socially connected students.

6. Conclusion

This study explored the potential of music education in primary and secondary schools in terms of psychological support, focusing on how music courses can be used as a "soft intervention" to

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2025.ND25685

promote students' emotional development and mental health. This study draws on theories of music psychology and educational psychology, and conducts comparative analysis through cases in China and the UK. This paper reveals that music education has unique opportunities for emotional expression, stress reduction, attention regulation, and social connection in addition to skill training and aesthetic appreciation. While the UK has systematically integrated mental health into music education, China continues to prioritize skill development and cultural preservation. To fully realize the emotional benefits of music, greater attention should be given to embedding psychological support within the curriculum.

However, this study also faces some limitations. Cross-national comparisons are inherently affected by cultural and institutional differences, which may limit the direct transferability of specific practices. In addition, the scope of this study is limited to general music education in schools and does not extend to extracurricular or clinical music therapy programs. Future research can draw on qualitative and quantitative research to measure the impact of specific music interventions on students' emotional and behavioral outcomes. In addition, interdisciplinary collaboration between music educators, psychologists, and school counselors is essential to jointly develop practical curriculum models and teacher training frameworks.

References

[1] World Health Organization. (2021). Improving the mental and brain health of children and adolescents. Retrieved from https: //www.who.int/activities/improving-the-mental-and-brain-health-of-children-and-adolescents

[2] Wang, X., Sun, Y., Lü, L., et al. (2023). Analysis of suicide behaviors and influencing factors among middle school students in five provinces of China. Chinese Journal of Public Health, 39(2), 219–223.

[3] Hu, X., & Zhang, X. (2021). Thought and practice of whole person education from a cross-cultural perspective. Journal of Jishou University (Social Sciences Edition), 42(4), 123–130. [In Chinese]

[4] Dimitriev, D., Indeykina, O., & Dimitriev, A. (2023). The effect of auditory stimulation on the nonlinear dynamics of heart rate: the impact of emotional valence and arousal. Noise and Health, 25(118), 165-175.

[5] Powers, J. M., Ioachim, G., & Stroman, P. W. (2022). Music to my senses: functional magnetic resonance imaging evidence of music analgesia across connectivity networks spanning the brain and brainstem. Frontiers in Pain Research, 3, 878258.

[6] Bușu, A. F. (2020). Emotional intelligence as a type of cognitive ability. Revista de Științe Politice. Revue des Sciences Politiques, (66), 204-215.

[7] Cong-Lem, N. (2023). Emotion and its relation to cognition from Vygotsky's perspective. European Journal of Psychology of Education, 38(2), 865-880.

[8] Bouchrika, I. (2025). Best Music for Studying in 2025: Baroque & Classical Pieces. Education.

[9] Cui, D. Y. (2024, June). The healing power of music: Supporting the mental health of primary and secondary school students. Minzhu Magazine. Retrieved from https: //www.mj.org.cn/zsjg/mzzzs/mzzxyd/sy/202407/t20240726_288422.htm

[10] Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China. (2022). Compulsory education art curriculum standards (2022 edition) [National curriculum standard]. Beijing: Educational Science Publishing House.

[11] A New Direction. (n.d.). Wellbeing playlist: Music, movement & student wellbeing [Educational resource]. The Roundhouse. Retrieved July 3, 2025, from https: //www.anewdirection.org.uk/blog/music-movement-student-wellbeing-new-ks3-resource