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Music as a Medium for Character Education in Elementary Schools: Teachers' and Students' Experiences

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Abstract

Music offers opportunities to integrate character education into elementary school learning through activities that encourage emotional expression, cooperation, discipline, and social interaction. This study aims to explore teachers' and students' experiences of using music as a medium for character education in elementary schools. A qualitative descriptive approach is employed to examine musical activities, character values promoted through music, and participants' perceptions of the relationship between musical participation and character development. Data are collected through semi-structured interviews and documentation, then analyzed thematically to identify patterns related to instructional practices and character education. The study focuses on how musical activities may provide opportunities for students to practice responsibility, cooperation, respect, and self-discipline. By examining teachers' instructional approaches and students' experiences, this research seeks to provide insights into the opportunities and challenges of integrating music into character education. The study is expected to contribute to the development of more meaningful and context-sensitive approaches to character education in elementary schools.

INTRODUCTION

Education plays a fundamental role in children's intellectual, emotional, social, and moral development. Beyond knowledge transmission, education should foster values, attitudes, and behaviors that guide students' interactions with others. In elementary education, character development is particularly important for cultivating empathy, responsibility, cooperation, and self-discipline. Therefore, character education should provide meaningful learning experiences through which students can practice and reflect on these values in everyday life.

Music offers a potential medium for character education because musical activities involve emotional expression, attentive listening, coordination, and social interaction. Hallam (2010) examined the relationship between active musical engagement and children's intellectual, social, and personal development, including self-confidence, emotional sensitivity, teamwork, and self-discipline. Similarly, Blasco-Magraner et al. (2021), through a systematic review of studies involving children aged 3–12 years, identified potential benefits of music education for emotional intelligence, academic performance, and prosocial skills. These findings suggest that music may support character development, although its benefits depend partly on the quality of learning experiences and do not automatically result from musical participation.

In elementary schools, activities such as group singing, rhythmic exercises, instrumental practice, and collaborative performances can provide opportunities for students to practice discipline, cooperation, patience, and responsibility. Through these activities, students learn to follow shared rules, coordinate their actions, listen to others, and contribute to collective goals. Teachers play an important role in connecting musical participation with character education by designing purposeful activities, encouraging positive interactions, and facilitating reflection on students' experiences. Consequently, the educational value of music should be examined through instructional practices and students' experiences rather than assumed solely from their participation in musical activities (Hallam, 2010; Blasco-Magraner et al., 2021).

Although previous research has examined the relationship between music and children's personal, social, and emotional development, further investigation is needed to understand how music is specifically used as a medium for character education in elementary schools. Hallam (2010) examined the broader developmental contributions of musical engagement, while Blasco-Magraner et al. (2021) focused on the educational use of music and children's emotional development. Building on these studies, the present research aims to explore teachers' and students' experiences of using music as a medium for character education in elementary schools. Specifically, it examines the musical activities employed, the character values teachers seek to cultivate, and participants' perceptions of the relationship between musical participation and character development. The study is expected to provide insights into the opportunities and challenges of integrating music into character education.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach to explore teachers' and students' experiences of using music as a medium for character education in elementary schools. A qualitative approach was selected because it enables researchers to understand participants' experiences and perspectives within an educational context (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The participants consisted of two elementary school teachers and one student selected purposively based on their involvement in the learning process. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews focusing on musical activities, character values promoted through music, and participants' experiences of character development. Documentation was also used to support the interview data.

Data were analyzed thematically following Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework, which comprises six phases: familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. The analysis focused on identifying patterns related to musical learning activities, character values, and participants' experiences. Documentation was used to support the interpretation of interview findings.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Music as a Medium for Character Education

Character education is an important dimension of elementary education because it concerns not only students' acquisition of knowledge but also the development of values, attitudes, and behaviors that guide their interactions with others. In this context, music offers an educational medium through which character-related values can be introduced and practiced within meaningful learning experiences. Unlike approaches that communicate moral values exclusively through verbal explanations, music involves active participation, emotional expression, listening, coordination, and interaction. These characteristics provide opportunities for students to experience the social and emotional dimensions of learning while developing musical knowledge and skills.

Hallam (2010) reviewed empirical research on the intellectual, social, and personal development associated with active musical engagement. The review discussed potential relationships between music participation and several developmental outcomes, including self-confidence, emotional sensitivity, social skills, teamwork, and self-discipline. These findings provide a theoretical foundation for considering music as a complementary medium for character education. However, the developmental outcomes associated with musical participation should not be interpreted as automatic consequences of learning music. Hallam (2010) emphasized that positive effects on personal and social development depend partly on the quality of musical engagement and whether students experience it as enjoyable and rewarding.

The relationship between music and character education has also been examined more directly by Lee (2016), who investigated a character education program integrating music and other activities in early childhood settings in Taiwan. The study identified six character values incorporated into classroom instruction: caring for others, courage, cooperation, respect, responsibility, and honesty. Teachers reported positive changes in students' social interactions and behavior when character values were integrated into classroom activities. This research is particularly relevant because it considers music within a broader educational process rather than treating musical performance as an isolated activity.

Similarly, Agustri et al. (2025) examined discipline and responsibility in music learning during the CARITA performance at an elementary school in Sukabumi, Indonesia. Their study focused on how these two character values were expressed in a school music performance. This research provides a relevant Indonesian context for discussing the relationship between musical participation and character education. Taken together, Lee (2016) and Agustri et al. (2025) illustrate two complementary perspectives: integrating explicit character values into music-related learning activities and examining the expression of particular character values during musical performance.

These studies suggest that the educational significance of music extends beyond the acquisition of artistic competence. Music can provide a context in which students encounter expectations concerning participation, cooperation, respect, and responsibility. Nevertheless, the relationship between music and character development must be examined through the specific learning activities, teacher practices, and student experiences involved. Therefore, music is best understood as a potential medium for character education whose contribution depends on how musical experiences are organized and connected to educational objectives.

Musical Participation and the Development of Discipline and Responsibility

Discipline and responsibility are relevant dimensions of character education because musical activities often require students to follow instructions, maintain routines, prepare materials, and fulfill individual roles within a group. During rehearsals or performances, students may need to arrive on time, practice consistently, follow musical arrangements, and complete assigned tasks. These activities create opportunities for students to practice responsible behavior in a structured learning environment.

Agustri et al. (2025) specifically examined discipline and responsibility in music learning during an elementary school CARITA performance. Their study illustrates the relevance of musical performance as a setting for examining these character values. In a group performance, the quality of the collective outcome depends partly on each participant's contribution. Students who neglect their assigned responsibilities may affect the coordination of the entire group. Conversely, fulfilling individual roles can help students recognize that their actions have consequences for other participants.

From an educational perspective, this relationship can be interpreted through the connection between structured practice and behavioral responsibility. Rehearsals provide repeated opportunities to follow agreed procedures, respond to feedback, and prepare for a shared performance. Such routines may help students practice consistency and accountability. However, completing musical tasks should not automatically be interpreted as evidence of internalized character. A student may follow instructions because of external supervision rather than an independent understanding of responsibility. Teachers therefore need to consider whether students gradually demonstrate responsible behavior beyond the immediate requirements of a particular musical activity.

Hallam (2010) also identified self-discipline as one of the personal development outcomes examined in research on musical engagement. This perspective supports the relevance of sustained musical practice for character education, although the strength of the relationship depends on the conditions under which music is taught and experienced. Discipline should not be reduced to obedience alone; it can also involve students' capacity to regulate their actions, persist through challenges, and understand their responsibilities toward others.

Cooperation, Respect, and Collective Responsibility in Group Music-Making

Cooperation is another important dimension of character education that can be explored through group singing, instrumental ensembles, rhythmic exercises, and collaborative performances. These activities require participants to coordinate their actions, listen to others, adjust their contributions, and work toward a shared objective. The collective nature of music-making provides an educational context in which students can experience the relationship between individual participation and group outcomes.

Hallam (2010) discussed teamwork and social skills among the developmental outcomes associated with active musical engagement. This relationship is especially relevant to activities in which students perform together rather than work independently. In an ensemble, individual musical contributions must be coordinated with those of other participants. Students need to pay attention to timing, rhythm, dynamics, and the contributions of their peers. Such requirements create opportunities to practice attentive listening, mutual adjustment, and cooperation.

Lee (2016) also incorporated cooperation and respect into a character education program integrating music and other classroom activities. The study's emphasis on these values suggests that musical learning can be organized to address social behavior explicitly. Cooperation, in this context, involves more than completing a group assignment. It includes recognizing the contributions of others, accepting shared responsibilities, and responding constructively when participants have different abilities or preferences.

These processes are educationally significant because elementary school students may differ in musical experience, confidence, learning pace, and willingness to participate. A group activity can provide opportunities for students to assist peers, share responsibilities, and learn to value different contributions. However, group participation does not necessarily guarantee cooperation. Some students may dominate an activity, while others may become passive or excluded. Teachers therefore need to organize participation so that students have meaningful opportunities to contribute and experience mutual responsibility.

Respect is closely related to this process. Students must recognize that collective music-making requires attention to other participants and acceptance of shared arrangements. Respect may be practiced when students listen while others perform, respond appropriately to feedback, and acknowledge differences in musical ability. Lee's (2016) study provides a relevant example of incorporating respect into music-based character education, while Hallam (2010) offers broader evidence concerning the potential relationship between musical engagement and social development.

From this perspective, the value of group music-making lies not merely in the final performance but also in the interactions that occur during preparation and practice. Teachers can make these interactions educationally meaningful by discussing how students cooperate, respond to mistakes, and support their peers. Reflection can help students recognize that the success of a performance depends on both musical

competence and the quality of their collective participation. Nevertheless, whether such experiences lead to lasting changes in cooperation and respect must be established through systematic observation and participant accounts rather than inferred from the existence of group activities alone.

The Teacher's Role in Integrating Music and Character Education

The contribution of music to character education depends substantially on how teachers organize learning experiences. Music can be used primarily to develop artistic skills, but it can also be integrated into broader educational objectives concerning responsibility, cooperation, respect, and emotional awareness. These purposes are not mutually exclusive. A well-designed activity can support musical learning while providing opportunities for students to practice positive social behavior.

Hallam (2010) emphasized that the positive effects of musical engagement on personal and social development depend partly on the quality of the teaching and the extent to which participation is enjoyable and rewarding. This observation has important implications for elementary education. If musical activities are organized exclusively around technical accuracy or competition, opportunities for reflection and cooperation may receive insufficient attention. Conversely, activities that emphasize shared participation, supportive feedback, and constructive responses to mistakes can create more explicit opportunities to connect music with character education.

Lee (2016) offers a further perspective through the integration of six character values into classroom instruction involving music and other activities. This approach suggests that character-related objectives should be incorporated into instructional planning rather than left as incidental outcomes. Teachers can identify the values they intend to address, select appropriate activities, and establish opportunities for students to demonstrate those values through participation.

For example, a group singing activity can be designed to address attentive listening and respect, while an ensemble project can emphasize responsibility for assigned roles and cooperation in achieving a shared performance. Teachers may also establish routines for preparing instruments, organizing practice sessions, and evaluating group participation. Such activities provide observable situations in which students can practice the behaviors associated with the intended values.

Nevertheless, teachers should avoid reducing character education to a checklist of desirable behaviors. A student who follows instructions during a supervised performance may not necessarily understand why responsibility matters. Character education therefore requires attention to students' understanding, motivation, and capacity to apply values in different situations. Reflection, discussion, and opportunities for independent decision-making can complement the practical experiences provided by musical learning.

Assessment should similarly consider more than the quality of the final performance. Teachers can observe participation, task completion, responsiveness to peers, and the ways students handle disagreement or mistakes. These observations

should be interpreted cautiously and, where possible, combined with students' accounts and other evidence. Such an approach can help teachers distinguish musical achievement from character-related learning while recognizing that both dimensions may develop through the same educational activity.

Integrating Music into Elementary School Character Education

Integrating music into character education requires a clear relationship between educational objectives, musical activities, and opportunities for reflection. Rather than assuming that all music activities produce the same benefits, teachers can select activities according to the values they intend to address and the needs of their students.

The literature suggests several possible areas of integration. Hallam (2010) discusses the potential relationship between musical engagement and self-discipline, teamwork, and social skills. Lee (2016) examines the incorporation of caring, courage, cooperation, respect, responsibility, and honesty into a character education program involving music and other activities. Agustri et al. (2025) focus specifically on discipline and responsibility in elementary school music learning. Meanwhile, Blasco-Magraner et al. (2021) provide broader evidence concerning music's potential contribution to emotional development and prosocial skills.

These studies collectively suggest that music-based character education can be approached through multiple dimensions. Structured practice may provide opportunities to exercise discipline and responsibility; collaborative performance may create contexts for cooperation and respect; and emotionally expressive activities may support reflection on feelings and interpersonal relationships. However, these connections should be treated as educational possibilities supported to varying degrees by existing research, not as universally established causal relationships.

The integration of music into character education also needs to account for differences in students' musical abilities, cultural backgrounds, and access to learning resources. Schools do not necessarily need sophisticated instruments or elaborate performance facilities to create meaningful musical experiences. Singing, rhythmic movement, body percussion, and the use of locally available instruments may offer accessible starting points. The selection of activities should consider students' developmental levels and ensure that participation is inclusive.

In culturally diverse settings, traditional music may also provide opportunities to connect character education with cultural appreciation and collective participation. Such activities can introduce students to musical traditions while creating contexts for discussing respect, cooperation, and responsibility. However, cultural content should be incorporated thoughtfully, with attention to the meanings associated with particular traditions rather than treating traditional music simply as a convenient tool for teaching moral values.

CONCLUSION

Music offers a potential medium for integrating character education into elementary school learning. Through activities such as group singing, rhythmic exercises, instrumental practice, and collaborative performances, students can practice discipline, responsibility, cooperation, respect, and empathy. Music-based character education provides opportunities for students to develop social and emotional skills while participating in meaningful musical experiences. However, its educational contribution depends on teachers' ability to integrate character-development objectives into musical activities, facilitate positive interactions, and encourage students to reflect on their experiences.

Future research should explore how teachers implement music-based character education, how students experience musical learning, and whether character-related behaviors are sustained beyond musical activities. Interviews, classroom observations, and longitudinal assessments may provide deeper insights into the processes and conditions through which music contributes to character development. Such investigations can strengthen the evidence base for developing inclusive and context-sensitive music education practices that support students' personal and social development in elementary schools.

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