



Comparative Analysis of Music Education Content in Preschool Curriculum: A Case Study of Mongolia and China

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Abstract

Original Research Article

Early childhood music education plays a significant role in fostering children’s cognitive, emotional, social, and aesthetic development. A well-structured curriculum is crucial in guiding teachers’ pedagogical practices and ensuring age-appropriate musical experiences. This study aims to comparatively analyze the structure and music education content of preschool curricula in Mongolia and Inner Mongolia (China). Using document analysis, comparison, interviews, and observation methods, the study examines similarities and differences in curriculum goals, structure, implementation strategies, and developmental expectations related to music education.

The findings indicate that while both curricula emphasize holistic child development and integrate music within broader artistic domains, differences exist in structural organization, developmental progression, and the explicit articulation of musical competencies. The Mongolian curriculum presents music within the integrated domain of “Music and Visual Arts,” focusing on listening, singing, playing instruments, and movement. In contrast, the Inner Mongolian framework categorizes music under “Arts” with more detailed developmental benchmarks by age group (3, 4, 5 years).

The study highlights the need for clearer performance standards, repertoire guidelines, and teacher support mechanisms in Mongolia and suggests integrating structured developmental indicators similar to the Inner Mongolian model. The research contributes to curriculum improvement and provides recommendations for developing a model preschool music curriculum aligned with children’s developmental needs and cultural heritage.

Keywords: preschool education, music curriculum, comparative study, Mongolia, Inner Mongolia, early childhood development

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Introduction

Curriculum is widely recognized as the foundational document guiding educational practice and policy implementation within

formal schooling systems. It is not merely a technical plan for instruction but a reflection of a nation’s educational philosophy, cultural identity, and developmental aspirations. As Pinar (2012) argues, curriculum constitutes a complex



intellectual and cultural project through which societies articulate what counts as legitimate knowledge and desirable forms of human development. Similarly, Null (2011) emphasizes that curriculum embodies both theoretical orientations and practical decisions concerning what should be taught, how it should be organized, and for what purposes. In this sense, curriculum simultaneously functions as a policy instrument, a pedagogical framework, and a cultural text. Bilbao et al. (2008) conceptualize curriculum as encompassing not only planned learning experiences delivered within schools but also the broader sociocultural contexts within which learning unfolds. This perspective aligns with Stenhouse's (1975) process-oriented view of curriculum, which highlights the dynamic interaction between intended objectives and lived classroom realities. From a sociocultural standpoint, curriculum mediates between national aspirations and individual developmental pathways (Vygotsky, 1978), shaping how children experience institutionalized learning. In early childhood education (ECE), curriculum assumes particular significance due to the rapid, multidimensional development that occurs during the early years. International policy frameworks underscore that high-quality early childhood curricula must promote holistic development by integrating cognitive, linguistic, social, emotional, physical, and creative dimensions (OECD, 2018; UNESCO, 2017). The OECD's *Starting Strong V* report (2018) emphasizes that early childhood curricula should provide balanced, play-based learning experiences that nurture executive functioning, emotional regulation, collaboration, and creativity. Likewise, UNESCO (2017), within the Education 2030 Framework for Action, stresses the importance of inclusive and culturally responsive early childhood curricula that establish foundations for lifelong learning. Developmental neuroscience further reinforces this perspective, demonstrating that early experiences significantly shape neural architecture and long-term educational trajectories (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Within this holistic developmental framework, music education occupies a uniquely powerful position.

The Role of Music in Early Childhood Development

Research consistently demonstrates that structured musical engagement in early childhood contributes to language acquisition, phonological awareness, and vocabulary development (Gordon et al., 2015; Moreno et al., 2009). Musical participation has also been linked to enhanced working memory and executive functioning (Degé, Kubicek, & Schwarzer, 2011), improved fine and gross motor coordination (Williams et al., 2015), and strengthened socio-emotional competencies such as empathy and cooperation (Kirschner & Tomasello, 2010). From an aesthetic and cultural perspective, music offers opportunities for symbolic expression, emotional nuance, and identity formation (Campbell & Scott-Kassner, 2014). Hallam (2010) further argues that sustained musical experiences in early childhood positively influence self-confidence, intrinsic motivation, and resilience. Thus, music education is not a peripheral enrichment activity but a central domain contributing to holistic development. Despite its documented benefits, significant implementation challenges remain. Teachers frequently report uncertainty regarding developmental expectations related to pitch accuracy, rhythmic progression, and expressive interpretation (Barrett, 2009). In curriculum frameworks that articulate broad competencies without operational specificity, educators often rely heavily on personal musical background and available resources (Hennessy, 2000). Insufficient methodological training, limited repertoire guidance, and lack of assessment tools may hinder systematic skill progression and institutional consistency (Welch, 2005). These challenges underscore the importance of curriculum structures that balance flexibility with developmental clarity. Comparative curriculum research offers valuable insights into how different educational systems conceptualize and operationalize music education (Phillips & Ochs, 2004). By examining structural organization, competency articulation, and cultural integration, scholars can identify strengths, gaps, and transferable practices. Given the shared cultural heritage yet distinct policy frameworks of Mongolia and Inner Mongolia

(China), a systematic comparison of their preschool music curricula presents a particularly compelling analytical case. Accordingly, this study addresses the following research question:

How do the preschool curricula of Mongolia and Inner Mongolia differ in structural organization and music education content, and what implications do these differences hold for the refinement of preschool music curriculum development?

Through this inquiry, the study contributes to broader discourse on culturally grounded yet developmentally structured early childhood music education.

Evolution of Curriculum Theory

Curriculum theory has evolved substantially over the past century, reflecting shifts in philosophical orientation, sociopolitical context, and epistemological assumptions regarding knowledge and human development. Early curriculum theorists conceptualized curriculum primarily as a systematic plan for organizing subject matter and instructional objectives. Johnson (1967) defined curriculum as a structured series of intended learning outcomes, emphasizing coherence and measurable objectives. This technical-rational perspective aligns with Tyler's (1949) objectives-based model, which framed curriculum development around four guiding questions concerning purpose, learning experiences, organization, and evaluation. Subsequent scholars challenged purely technical approaches. Stenhouse (1975) reconceptualized curriculum as a process rather than a product, advocating for teacher interpretation and professional judgment. Pratt (1980) identified content-centered, learner-centered, and problem-centered orientations, illustrating the philosophical diversity underlying curriculum design. Null (2011) further elaborates multiple philosophical orientations embedded within curriculum models:

- Systematic orientation: emphasizes measurable standards and efficiency
- Liberal orientation: prioritizes intellectual and cultural transmission

- Pragmatic orientation: foregrounds experiential learning
- Existential orientation: centers on personal meaning-making
- Deliberative orientation: stresses democratic dialogue in curriculum decisions

These orientations reveal that curriculum reflects deeper societal values concerning knowledge and human flourishing (Pinar, 2012). From a sociocultural perspective, curriculum embodies what Apple (2004) terms "official knowledge," reflecting power relations and cultural priorities within educational systems. In ECE contexts, curriculum must therefore balance national identity, developmental science, and pedagogical flexibility.

Curriculum Reform in Mongolia and China

In Mongolia, recent curriculum reforms emphasize competency-based education and holistic child development. Influenced by global discourse and Sustainable Development Goal 4, Mongolia's preschool curriculum (Ministry of Education and Science of Mongolia, 2019; revised 2023) integrates developmental domains such as social competence, language, cognitive development, health, and arts. The framework outlines guiding principles, learning areas, methodological guidance, environmental standards, and assessment strategies. It reflects a pragmatic and culturally responsive orientation, emphasizing national heritage and developmental progression. In China, the Ministry of Education introduced the *3–6-Year-Old Children's Learning and Development Guidelines* (2012), establishing age-specific expectations across five domains: Health, Language, Society, Science, and Arts. This framework integrates systematic benchmarks with experiential learning principles (Li, 2012; Zhu & Zhang, 2008). The model reflects a blend of systematic and pragmatic orientations, combining structured progression with developmental sensitivity. Comparative analysis of these frameworks reveals philosophical distinctions in structural specificity, competency articulation, and assessment emphasis (Phillips

& Ochs, 2004). Such distinctions provide the interpretive lens for examining differences in music education content.

Theoretical Foundations of Early Childhood Music Education

Music education in early childhood draws upon interdisciplinary foundations in psychology, neuroscience, and pedagogy. Teplov (2003) conceptualized musical aptitude as comprising three foundational components:

1. Pitch perception
2. Rhythm perception
3. Musical memory

These psychological capacities underpin later performance and creative expression. Radinova and Komissarova (2014) expanded this model into three developmental tiers:

- Basic musical abilities (auditory discrimination)
- Performance abilities (singing accuracy, coordination)
- Creative abilities (improvisation, interpretation)

Gordon's (2012) Music Learning Theory emphasizes *audiation*—the internal processing of musical sound—as foundational to musical growth. Welch (2005) highlights the gradual development of vocal range and breath control in preschool years. Neuroscientific evidence further demonstrates that musical engagement enhances neural connectivity in language and executive functioning regions (Moreno et al., 2009; Hallam, 2010). In practice, early childhood music curricula should therefore cultivate:

- Listening sensitivity
- Vocal development
- Instrumental coordination
- Movement expression
- Creative improvisation

Developmental psychology provides additional grounding. Piaget (1969) notes that preschool

children operate within the preoperational stage, characterized by symbolic thinking and intuitive reasoning. Therefore, music activities must be concrete and play-based. Vygotsky's (1978) Zone of Proximal Development further emphasizes scaffolding—tasks should slightly exceed independent ability while remaining attainable with guidance. Collectively, these theoretical perspectives indicate that early childhood music curricula must:

- Align with developmental capacities
- Scaffold progression systematically
- Integrate perceptual, motor, emotional, and creative dimensions
- Clearly articulate age-appropriate expectations (pitch range, rhythm complexity, expressive ability)

Such clarity becomes especially important in comparative curriculum analysis, where structural specificity and developmental benchmarks may differ across contexts.

Research Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative comparative research design to investigate structural and content-based differences in preschool music education curricula between Mongolia and Inner Mongolia (China). Comparative education research is particularly appropriate when examining how educational systems with shared cultural and historical foundations but divergent policy contexts conceptualize and operationalize curriculum frameworks (Phillips & Ochs, 2004). Because the purpose of the study was interpretive rather than evaluative, a qualitative approach was selected. The research sought to explore curriculum philosophy, structural organization, developmental sequencing, and pedagogical implications rather than to measure quantifiable outcomes. Qualitative inquiry enables in-depth examination of contextual meanings embedded within policy documents and professional practices (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), making it particularly suitable for curriculum analysis. The study followed a descriptive–interpretive comparative model. Rather than ranking one curriculum as superior

to the other, the research aimed to identify patterns, similarities, differences, and areas for mutual learning. Data were collected from four primary sources to enhance analytical depth and triangulation. The first data source consisted of Mongolia's official Preschool Core Curriculum approved by the Ministry of Education and Science in 2019 and revised in 2023. This national framework outlines guiding principles, developmental domains, methodological recommendations, learning environment standards, and assessment approaches. Particular analytical attention was devoted to the "Music and Visual Arts" domain, including its competency statements, developmental progression, and pedagogical guidance. The second primary document was China's "3–6-Year-Old Children's Learning and Development Guidelines" (2012), which are implemented in Inner Mongolia as part of the national early childhood education framework. This policy articulates developmental expectations across five domains—Health, Language, Society, Science, and Arts—and specifies age-related benchmarks for children aged 3–4, 4–5, and 5–6 years. Within the Arts domain, music-related competencies are described through observable developmental indicators, reflecting a structured and benchmark-oriented curriculum model.

To contextualize curriculum implementation, semi-structured interviews were conducted with twelve preschool music teachers, six from Mongolia and six from Inner Mongolia. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure that each teacher had a minimum of three years of professional experience, direct responsibility for music-related instructional activities, and representation from both urban and semi-urban preschool settings. Semi-structured interviews allow flexibility while maintaining thematic focus, thereby facilitating exploration of participants' interpretations and lived experiences (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Interview questions addressed teachers' understanding of curriculum expectations, perceived clarity of music competency standards, challenges encountered in lesson planning, approaches to cultural repertoire selection, and assessment practices. Each

interview lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes and was audio-recorded with informed consent. In addition to document analysis and interviews, non-participant classroom observations were conducted in four preschools, two in Mongolia and two in Inner Mongolia. Observations focused on the structure and sequencing of music activities, teacher scaffolding strategies, children's participation dynamics, and alignment between written curriculum expectations and enacted classroom practice. Field notes were recorded systematically using an observation protocol derived from the curriculum's music competency categories. These observations were intended to provide contextual evidence regarding how policy frameworks are interpreted and operationalized in practice.

Document analysis served as the primary analytical method. According to Bowen (2009), document analysis is a systematic procedure for reviewing and evaluating materials to elicit meaning and develop empirical understanding. In curriculum research, official policy documents represent authoritative articulations of educational intent and structural design. The analytical process began with structural mapping to identify organizational frameworks, domain classifications, and developmental sequencing within each curriculum. This was followed by thematic content coding of music-related competencies into categories such as listening and appreciation, singing, instrumental play, movement and dramatization, creative expression, and assessment indicators. Particular attention was paid to the specificity of developmental benchmarks, including pitch range descriptors, rhythmic complexity, tempo control, expressive guidance, and progression across age groups. Finally, underlying philosophical orientations were interpreted using theoretical perspectives on curriculum models (Null, 2011; Pinar, 2012), including systematic, pragmatic, competency-based, and culturally responsive orientations.

Comparative analysis followed the methodological framework proposed by Bereday (1964) and further elaborated by Phillips and Ochs (2004), which consists of description, interpretation, juxtaposition, and comparison.

Each curriculum was first described independently to preserve contextual integrity. Interpretive analysis then examined sociocultural and policy influences shaping each framework. Juxtaposition tables were developed to align equivalent competency categories across systems. Finally, systematic comparison identified structural similarities, developmental distinctions, and implications for curriculum refinement. Interview data were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). The analytical process involved open coding, identification of recurring patterns, development of thematic categories, and cross-national comparison of themes. Emergent themes included clarity versus generality of developmental expectations, teacher autonomy in curriculum enactment, cultural repertoire integration, and challenges in assessment implementation. Observation notes were analyzed descriptively to examine alignment between written curriculum intentions and enacted pedagogical practices. Particular attention was paid to age-appropriate pitch modeling, rhythm scaffolding strategies, child participation patterns, and opportunities for creative improvisation. Observation findings were used to support and contextualize insights derived from interviews and document analysis.

To ensure credibility and trustworthiness, the study followed the criteria proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Data triangulation was achieved by integrating policy documents, teacher interviews, and classroom observations. Cross-check coding procedures were applied to enhance analytical reliability. Thick description was employed to provide contextual transparency, and member confirmation was used to clarify selected teacher interpretations. While findings are context-specific, detailed documentation of policy frameworks and methodological procedures supports transferability of analytical insights to broader early childhood curriculum discourse.

Ethical approval was obtained in accordance with institutional research guidelines. All participants were informed of the voluntary nature of their participation, their right to

withdraw at any time, and the confidentiality and anonymity of reported data. Interview transcripts were anonymized, and preschool institutions were coded to protect organizational identity.

Structural Comparison of Curriculum Frameworks

A comparative structural analysis of the preschool curricula of Mongolia and Inner Mongolia reveals both shared developmental commitments and notable differences in organizational logic and categorization. The Mongolian Preschool Core Curriculum is organized around six broad developmental domains: Social Development, Physical Development, Language, Nature and Environment, Mathematics, and Music and Visual Arts. Within this structure, music is integrated alongside visual arts under a combined artistic domain. This interdisciplinary configuration reflects an integrated orientation in which aesthetic expression, sensory development, and creative engagement are conceptualized as interconnected processes rather than isolated competencies. Music is therefore positioned within a holistic artistic framework rather than as a distinct, separately articulated subject. In contrast, the Inner Mongolia implementation of China's "3-6-Year-Old Children's Learning and Development Guidelines" is structured across five clearly delineated domains: Health, Language, Society, Science, and Arts. Music is situated within the Arts domain but is further differentiated through detailed subcategories and age-specific developmental descriptors. Unlike the Mongolian framework, which integrates music and visual arts within a single domain, the Inner Mongolian structure emphasizes categorical clarity and systematic sequencing.

The most significant structural difference lies in how music is positioned and articulated. Mongolia's integrated "Music and Visual Arts" domain highlights aesthetic synergy and interdisciplinary development. Inner Mongolia's domain-based organization, while also grouping music within Arts, provides explicit differentiation of musical competencies through clearly defined age-group progression. This

distinction reflects divergent curriculum philosophies. The Mongolian framework demonstrates a holistic and culturally embedded orientation, emphasizing interrelated developmental domains and aesthetic integration. The Inner Mongolian structure exhibits stronger domain clarity and systematic developmental sequencing, reflecting a more standardized organizational logic.

Comparative Analysis of Music Education Content

Mongolia: Broad Competency Orientation

Within the Mongolian curriculum, music education is articulated through four primary competency areas: listening and expressing feelings about music, singing, playing simple instruments, and moving or dramatizing with music. Developmental progression is categorized into three broad levels (I–III), which describe increasing complexity in performance and expression. However, these levels remain relatively general. For example, children are expected to “sing without losing pitch” or “express rhythm through movement,” yet specific technical benchmarks—such as defined pitch ranges, tempo parameters, or rhythmic pattern complexity—are not explicitly articulated.

The absence of detailed performance indicators suggests a flexible, teacher-mediated interpretation model. Teachers are granted considerable pedagogical autonomy to adapt expectations according to contextual conditions and children’s abilities. Interview findings indicate that many educators appreciate this flexibility, particularly in culturally responsive repertoire selection. However, several teachers also reported uncertainty regarding developmental boundaries, especially in determining appropriate vocal range and rhythmic scaffolding for different age groups.

The Mongolian curriculum places strong emphasis on aesthetic appreciation and cultural integration. Folk songs, traditional melodies, and nationally significant repertoire are encouraged as foundational learning materials. Music is conceptualized not merely as skill acquisition

but as a vehicle for cultural continuity, identity formation, and emotional expression.

Inner Mongolia: Age-Specific Developmental Benchmarks

In contrast, the Inner Mongolian framework provides clearly defined expectations across three age groups: 3–4 years, 4–5 years, and 5–6 years. For younger children, competencies include singing within a specified pitch range (e.g., c1–a1), clapping simple rhythmic patterns, recognizing instrument names, and participating in group singing. For middle-age preschoolers, expectations expand to include singing songs with faster tempo, demonstrating emerging breath control, performing simple choreographed dances, and coordinating rhythm with peers. For older preschoolers, competencies include expressing musical dynamics (such as loud/soft and fast/slow contrasts), performing cooperatively in small ensembles, demonstrating creative improvisation, and interpreting emotional character in music. Unlike Mongolia’s three broad developmental levels, the Inner Mongolian curriculum articulates measurable performance descriptors. Vocal pitch ranges are specified, tempo control is addressed, and rhythmic coordination is progressively scaffolded. Expressive nuance and ensemble participation are gradually introduced across age groups. This structure reduces interpretive ambiguity and aligns closely with systematic curriculum models characterized by developmental precision and measurable progression. Teachers reported greater clarity in instructional planning, particularly regarding vocal development and rhythm sequencing. However, some interview participants also noted that strict adherence to benchmarks may occasionally constrain repertoire flexibility.

Shared Foundations

Despite structural and procedural differences, both curricula share significant foundational principles. Both emphasize holistic child development and integrate singing, movement, and instrumental play as central components of early musical experience. Both frameworks encourage aesthetic appreciation and emotional

expression, recognizing music as a multidimensional developmental domain. Cultural heritage also occupies a prominent position in both contexts, with regional and national musical traditions shaping children's early experiences. In both systems, music education is positioned as a means of fostering creativity, social interaction, and emotional sensitivity rather than solely technical proficiency. These shared orientations indicate a common recognition of music's developmental and cultural value.

Key Differences

The primary distinctions between the two systems center on structural clarity, developmental specificity, and pedagogical guidance. Mongolia adopts an integrated model with broad developmental levels and general competency descriptions, granting teachers interpretive flexibility. Inner Mongolia employs a domain-based structure with clearly defined age benchmarks, specified pitch ranges, and progressive rhythmic and expressive expectations. These differences have implications for instructional consistency, assessment practices, and teacher preparation. The Mongolian approach prioritizes cultural richness and aesthetic integration but may produce variability in implementation. The Inner Mongolian model promotes coherence and measurable progression but may risk over-standardization if flexibility is limited.

Discussion

The comparative findings suggest that the Mongolian curriculum reflects a pragmatic and culturally grounded orientation. Music is embedded within a broader aesthetic domain, reinforcing the interconnectedness of artistic forms. The emphasis on national identity, traditional repertoire, and holistic expression aligns with curriculum perspectives that prioritize cultural transmission and child-centered exploration. However, the absence of explicit pitch ranges, rhythmic progression frameworks, and measurable performance descriptors may create variability in classroom practice. Teachers must rely heavily on personal

musical expertise to determine age-appropriate expectations. In contexts where teacher preparation in music pedagogy varies, this flexibility may lead to inconsistencies in skill progression. By contrast, the Inner Mongolian curriculum demonstrates stronger developmental alignment and measurable progression indicators. The articulation of pitch range (e.g., c1–a1 for younger children), breath control development, tempo management, and expressive nuance reflects systematic curriculum design. Such clarity supports instructional planning, accountability, and assessment coherence.

Nevertheless, highly structured developmental frameworks may risk over-standardization if not balanced with cultural responsiveness and creative flexibility. Music education in early childhood requires both developmental scaffolding and imaginative exploration. Taken together, the findings suggest complementary strengths. Mongolia offers cultural richness, aesthetic integration, and pedagogical flexibility. Inner Mongolia provides developmental specificity, technical clarity, and structured progression.

Conclusion

This comparative study demonstrates that although both Mongolia and Inner Mongolia aim to foster holistic development through preschool music education, their curriculum designs reflect distinct philosophical orientations and structural priorities. Inner Mongolia's framework provides clearly structured age-based benchmarks that offer teachers measurable guidance for pitch, rhythm, tempo, and expressive development. Mongolia emphasizes cultural integration and broad competency development within an interdisciplinary arts framework. For curriculum enhancement in Mongolia, the incorporation of age-specific developmental indicators and clearer methodological guidance could strengthen instructional consistency while preserving cultural authenticity. A hybrid model that integrates Mongolia's cultural depth with Inner Mongolia's structured developmental progression may enhance preschool music

education quality, teacher confidence, and child developmental outcomes.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, several recommendations are proposed. First, age-specific musical competency standards could be developed to define recommended pitch ranges, rhythmic complexity levels, and expressive expectations for children aged three to six. Second, structured repertoire lists categorized by vocal range, tempo, and developmental suitability could support teachers in selecting appropriate materials. Third, teacher training modules in early childhood music pedagogy—particularly in vocal development, rhythm instruction, and movement integration—should be strengthened. Fourth, observational assessment rubrics aligned with developmental benchmarks could support formative evaluation practices. Finally, curriculum refinement should maintain culturally grounded repertoire and traditional musical heritage while aligning with systematic developmental progression principles.

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