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Strategies for Preparing Students to Organize a Children'S Vocal Ensemble with a Multiethnic Composition

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Annotation

The article examines the key areas of organizing extracurricular musical activities for future teachers of music education at school. The author shares her experience in preparing students majoring in Music for professional pedagogical activity while studying the disciplines Didactics of Music Education at School and Didactics of Working with a Musical Group. Strategic approaches to the implementation of lectures and practical classes within the framework of the studied problem are presented.

A distinctive feature of the proposed approaches is the possible multiethnic composition of students in pedagogical practice and the intercultural interaction of participants within a children's vocal ensemble. Such ensembles are common in many multicultural schools in the Republic of Moldova and therefore require a professional and methodologically grounded approach to their organization. Accordingly, mini-models of such ensembles (group student projects) as well as individual projects are developed during classroom sessions, emphasizing the advantages of intercultural interaction.

As a result, students' musical outlook broadens; intercultural understanding and respect are fostered; cooperation and communication skills are enhanced; intercultural competence increases; and an inclusive and dynamic learning environment is created. The study summarizes the author's many years of practical and theoretical experience as a mentor in pedagogical practice, a lecturer of musical-theoretical disciplines, and a scientific supervisor of student research in the field of music teacher education.

The article outlines the stages of designing educational activities with students – from the formation of conceptual competence foundations to specific methodological recommendations for teaching, learning, and assessing students. The leitmotif of student training is the idea that adults are big children. Everything a student does must be experienced and emotionally perceived while assuming the role of a child – the very role toward which their pedagogical influence will later be directed.

Keywords: Children's Vocal Ensemble, Extracurricular Activities, Intercultural Interaction, Multiculturalism, Music Education, Future Music Teachers

Adults are Big Children

Melanie Kingston Within a vocal ensemble, favorable conditions and an educational environment are created for acquiring initial knowledge about the cultural characteristics of various peoples, fostering friendly and respectful attitudes based on acquaintance with their culture, traditions, and customs, since children of different ethnic backgrounds participate in the ensemble.

As previously noted by the author, "the problem of forming a creative personality among schoolchildren, their integration into life, and the search for their unique place within it remains highly relevant. Its solution is associated with overcoming numerous contradictions and dilemmas inherent in the contemporary pre-university education system of the Republic of Moldova. The urgency of this problem requires an active search for effective solutions. One such solution lies in the application of a competence-based approach to organizing and implementing students' extracurricular musical activities. Extracurricular musical activity contributes to a holistic worldview, the formation of key and specialized competencies, the development of the ability to identify hidden relationships and causal connections, and the cultivation or enhancement

of interest in music. Thus, this form of interaction with musical art constitutes a crucial and indispensable component in shaping a spiritually rich, highly cultured personality of a future citizen" [1].

The psychological mechanism underlying the formation of intercultural interaction skills during school education – as a foundation of multicultural upbringing – is based on creating conditions that generate interest and sympathy toward representatives of other cultures. This is primarily facilitated by the absence of negative stereotypes regarding cultural differences and national characteristics. For a child, such distinctions do not yet exist, as acquaintance with them is only beginning.

This creates prerequisites for fostering love for one's own culture while nurturing respect for the national traditions of other peoples. A key factor is reliance on the emotional component – children's emotional responses and feelings when encountering other cultures – combined with knowledge and representations of shared universal values such as kindness, justice, morality, and attitudes toward labor.

Experiencing national traditions and customs in childhood ensures that, in adulthood, individuals will never treat other cultures with disdain or hostility. Emotionally positive experiences – characteristic of vocal ensemble activities – form the foundation for value-based attitudes toward both one's own culture and others. Emotional memory preserves such experiences over time, leaving a lasting and often unconscious imprint. These positive social emotions are a determining factor in fostering openness and trust, thereby ensuring the foundation for positive intercultural communication in a developing personality.

The organization of a children's vocal ensemble is most effective when implemented through the creation of a musical-educational space that takes into account the ethno- and multicultural characteristics of a specific educational institution and the ethnic composition of its students. Unfortunately, the content of music education in this area remains insufficiently developed both in general and within the framework of the problem under consideration. The musical-educational space of polyethnic regions must be addressed not only in extracurricular student activities but also within university-level teacher training programs.

The development of multicultural music education can be viewed as a transition from ethnocentric standards in evaluating world music toward respect for and awareness of cultural differences. As noted by L. V. Kuznetsova, music teachers should not remain indifferent to their own cultural heritage, as their attitudes toward music are culturally rooted. At the same time, this does not preclude awareness of the relativity of personal experience and its cultural origins. From an educational perspective, it is essential to reflect on how inclusive one's view of music truly is [2].

Cross-cultural experience is critically important in contemporary music education, especially given intensified global interaction. The European Union, for example, has encountered growing cultural diversity due to migration and refugee movements. Similarly, the Republic of Moldova experiences cultural diversity in terms of ethnicity, language, religion, and art. This underscores the need to modernize education, including music education, with an emphasis on intercultural values.

Teachers' intercultural competence influences how they perceive students and recognize their strengths and weaknesses. Developing such competence enables reflection on instructional strategies for diverse cultural contexts and on the selection of educational materials that promote cultural responsibility. Furthermore, vocal ensemble instruction should ensure equitable development opportunities for all students.

As noted by G. K. Parinova and M. N. Rebenok, intercultural education aims to prevent racial and cross-cultural conflicts, promote social harmony, and foster peaceful coexistence among cultural traditions [3,4].

According to V. V. Putilovskaya, multicultural trends in music education often focus on musical styles and performance practices rather than on students' own cultures. Students are encouraged to familiarize themselves with multiple musical cultures in order to compare and understand diverse modes of musical expression [5].

However, I. S. Kobozeva challenges this approach, arguing that exposure to an excessive number of musical works can hinder deep and meaningful engagement with specific musical cultures [6]. Thus, dialogue within pedagogy and psychology regarding multicultural education in vocal ensembles remains ongoing.

Contemporary research criticizes the so-called "supermarket approach" or "musical tourism," in which students are presented with superficial samples from various cultures. This method may limit cultural understanding and foster stereotypes or negative perceptions [7].

As schools become increasingly ethnically diverse, there is a growing need for an "intercultural curriculum" that values cultural diversity, social justice, and equality. Music education should prioritize students' experiences, needs, and interests within a multicultural context, given music's privileged role in shaping cultural identity.

Educational practice in multicultural environments should reflect the diversity of “musical worlds” students inhabit or could inhabit if provided with appropriate opportunities. This involves integrating musical practice with reflection and information, fostering awareness and identity without necessarily pursuing explicitly integrative goals.

Culturally diverse societies are dynamic and constantly evolving. Accordingly, music teacher education must also be flexible and responsive. A critical question arises: does the activity of a children’s vocal ensemble reproduce a uniform or a diverse set of artistic and professional skills, or does it encourage students to develop a broader, inclusive, critical, and multicultural attitude toward music?

The choice of Melanie Kingston’s phrase as the epigraph reflects the belief that it should serve as a guiding principle for university didactic staff. Adult activity mirrors children’s activity at a different, more complex level. Therefore, in training future teachers, the initial stage should focus on mastering adult vocal performance techniques and ensemble organization methodologies. The next stage involves acquiring knowledge of child psychology, physiology, hygiene, musical abilities, and methods for organizing and leading children’s musical groups.

This approach must be implemented comprehensively across specialized disciplines, including: Methods of Working with Children’s Musical Groups, Choral Class, Vocal Studies, Conducting, Didactics of Music Education, Gymnasium Music Repertoire, Intercultural Education, and Music Management.

As a result, students develop a clear understanding of the key objectives of organizing a vocal ensemble, including:

- Enhancing pedagogical influence during students’ free time;
- Organizing socially beneficial and leisure activities in cooperation with cultural institutions and families;
- Identifying students’ interests and abilities in vocal performance;
- Supporting personal self-discovery;
- Creating conditions for individual development;
- Fostering creative experience and abilities;
- Enabling the application of acquired knowledge and skills;
- Developing informal communication and cooperation;
- Expanding interaction within a polyethnic society;
- Cultivating a culture of meaningful leisure.

Future educators must adhere to core principles of organizing children’s vocal activities:

- Continuity, systematic planning, consistency, regularity, and engagement;
- Diversification of repertoire;
- Selection of high-quality artistic material;
- Consideration of age-specific characteristics;
- Take into account the interesting content of the rehearsal work and the novelty of its elements;
- Stimulation of imagination and initiative;
- Maintain a certain duration of the lesson depending on the age of the children [8].

Ultimately, a professional approach is formed through a comprehensive set of competencies, including methodological mastery, pedagogical responsibility, repertoire selection, and leadership skills. The article concludes that organizing interaction within a multiethnic children’s vocal ensemble fosters emotional positivity toward cultural diversity and forms the foundation for intercultural dialogue, mutual respect, and constructive communication.

The didactic experience presented represents only a fraction of the methodologies applicable in training future music educators. Each academic group requires individualized, context-sensitive approaches based on its unique polyethnic composition.

Thus, the professional approach of future educators will be shaped by a comprehensive set of competencies in this field. This includes knowledge of the characteristics of organizing and managing children’s groups within the framework of formal and informal education; the ability to address complex musical-pedagogical tasks when mastering musical material (such as the development of musical ear, vocal skills, and creative abilities of group participants, etc.); mastery of rehearsal methodologies in children’s vocal ensembles (including general rehearsals, group, and individual sessions); the capacity and readiness to plan the educational process and engage in methodological work; the analysis of various pedagogical systems and methods, as well as the formulation of personal pedagogical principles and teaching methodologies, utilizing both traditional and contemporary educational technologies in the field of musical arts; the ability to take responsibility for the outcomes of one’s professional activities; and the capacity and willingness to conduct rehearsal work and lead a children’s ensemble, as well as curate repertoire for concert programs and other creative events.

For example, when studying the Topic: Organizing a Children’s Choir or Ensemble within the course “Methodology of Working with Children’s Musical Groups,” students become acquainted with the specifics of organizing and planning the activities of choral groups and ensembles; the nuances of children’s vocal education; the characteristics of children’s

voices; the exploration of developmental stages, vocal ranges, and the safeguarding of children's voices; and the methodology for developing vocal and choral skills. They practice working with song scores and selecting repertoire. The curriculum for this discipline includes one seminar session on the topic "Working with Song Scores" and two associated practical sessions, during which students demonstrate their ability to create a Plan for Working with a Song Score and a Practicum-Rehearsal for a Vocal Ensemble (project design). These skills are also reinforced in practical classes on choral studies, vocal training, and conducting. When studying the Topic: Vocal-Choral Performance in the course "Didactics of Musical Education," students similarly learn and practically consolidate this knowledge, but within the context of its application in music education lessons.

When studying the theme of Repertoire accompanying extracurricular activities of schoolchildren in musical education within the "Gymnasium Music Repertoire" course, students gain fundamental insights into the musical repertoire of a vocal ensemble. Specifically, this necessitates the ensemble leader to possess a clear, forward-looking vision of the pedagogical process as an integrated and coherent system, wherein each element, structural unit, and factor complements the others, thereby ensuring the resolution of unified artistic-creative and educational objectives.

Each leader formulates the repertoire individually, primarily based on the performers' proficiency level and material resources. However, there are common principles for repertoire formation, including:

- Ideological and artistic significance;
- Thematic relevance;
- Students' interest in the musical piece;
- Personal professional capacity;
- Diversity of forms and genres.

It is posited that when forming the repertoire, students must consider the following criteria:

- Adherence to the child's age and individual characteristics. The chosen piece should not only align with the age of the performers and ensemble members but also be crucial for the leader to consider and anticipate its impact, not only on the ensemble as a whole but also on each student as a developing performer.
- Accessibility for comprehension and performance. The repertoire is defined by the set goals and objectives, the educational work plan for the ensemble, and should be intrinsically linked to the immediate and long-term prospects of the ensemble's development [9].

Furthermore, in the process of selecting song material, students are taught to consider two aspects simultaneously: 1) the repertoire should be diverse in its figurative and stylistic characteristics (encompassing works of various genres, styles, and being ethno-culturally rich); and 2) the programmatic repertoire should consist of pieces of varying difficulty levels.

During lectures and practical sessions, the educator selects repertoire representing diverse cultures to introduce students to the musical traditions of other countries. Additionally, works in different languages are offered for study, aiming to enhance students' linguistic skills and improve their understanding of cultural nuances.

In the context of collaborative performance, students should be encouraged to work together on the interpretation of pieces from different cultures, recognizing that shared execution fosters opportunities for the exchange of musical knowledge and practices, as well as for the development of mutual understanding.

To facilitate cultural exchange, masterclasses or performances by invited musicians from other cultures are organized, providing students with direct opportunities to interact with representatives of different cultures and learn about their musical traditions firsthand. Students are recommended to be involved in various forms of research and discussion, such as exploring cultures represented in the repertoire or engaging in debates where students can share their knowledge and understanding of different musical styles and traditions.

Across all educational courses, without exception, it is imperative to promote and expand intercultural competencies, actively motivating students to do so. Primarily, this entails fostering cultural self-awareness, respect for other cultures, and the ability to communicate effectively in intercultural/multicultural environments. To achieve these objectives, the educator is obligated to create an inclusive environment where students from diverse cultural backgrounds feel valued and respected. They should be encouraged to share their perspectives and contribute to the learning process.

For individual work within the "Didactics of Music Education" course, students are required to present a music-thematic complex for extracurricular activities of schoolchildren. The main evaluation criteria for this complex include: the diversity of musical material; its alignment with curricular content and children's age-appropriate capabilities; aesthetic presentation; knowledge of diverse repertoire; the ability to evaluate musical works; creative thinking and the search for new content in practical experience; and the capacity to operate within an intercultural environment, demonstrating understanding and respect for other cultures.

Another form of individual assignment is the creation of an authorial curriculum for extracurricular activities in schools. Students are given the option to develop a program of work for a specific ensemble or club for a defined period (with authorial justification). Among the well-known directions for vocal ensembles with students, any of them can be organized, including: folk, jazz, pop, VIA (Vocal-Instrumental Ensemble), duets, trios, etc. Group student projects are also welcomed. The results are evaluated according to the established criteria: the ability to analyze and assess literature relevant to the issue and to independently design programs for extracurricular musical education and development of schoolchildren; creative thinking and the search for new content in practical experience; knowledge of music theory disciplines; knowledge of the psychological and pedagogical characteristics of students; proficiency in psycho-pedagogical tools pertinent to the issue; and the ability to creatively apply presented didactic developments.

Let us provide some methodological guidelines, using the example of creating a folk ensemble. Students need to recognize that folk culture, which enters a child's life almost from the first days, possesses the richest potential for familiarization with their own culture and the cultures of other peoples. It assists a child in realizing their belonging to a particular national community, facilitates the assimilation of their culture's values (language, literature, traditions), and conveys the norms and rules of that community's life in an understandable form. The oral, musical, and decorative-applied art of any nation invariably encompasses the full richness of its unique cultural heritage, its values – notions of good, beauty, loyalty, bravery, diligence, national character traits, rituals, festivals, clothing, and the daily lives of people within a specific national community.

It is important to note that merely narrating folk traditions and customs will not yield significant results if they are not reflected in the diverse forms of children's artistic and aesthetic activities, such as games, musical, visual, and theatrical endeavors. When discussing the rich potential of folklore in fostering intercultural interaction skills, particularly among younger schoolchildren, its communicative-game-based creative nature should be especially emphasized.

Therefore, the process of developing intercultural interaction skills will be effective if conditions are created for student collaboration during the celebration of folk holidays and rituals, and in the performance of folk works through independent creative endeavors, which include:

- Staging of folk tales and songs, proverbs, and invocations.
- Musical-rhythmic activities: learning traditional active games and folk dances.
- Instrumental performance: arranging various types of folk works and instrumental improvisations using folk musical instruments.

This will contribute to the accumulation of impressions, communication experience, and interaction with others. These objectives are successfully addressed through the preparation and execution of various national festive, leisure events, and entertainment activities (e.g., Moldavian, Bulgarian, Ukrainian, Gagauz celebrations like Duminița mare, Heitura, Poperuda; Trinity Sunday, Maslenitsa, Svyatki, Petrovden, Trifon Zarezan, Hederlez, Kolada, Vesnyanki, Zelyeni svyata , etc.). These events help introduce national traditions and customs, impart moral concepts of various peoples, and teach children to interact constructively, taking into account different ethnic traditions [10].

At the transversal level of competence, a student's abilities will be manifested in their capacity to foster artistic needs and aesthetic taste in learners; to develop their cognitive abilities and activity: creative initiative, independence, responsibility, and organization; to cultivate independent thinking, the capacity for self-development, self-improvement, and self-realization; and to demonstrate readiness for a tolerant perception of social and cultural differences, along with a respectful and considerate attitude towards historical heritage and cultural traditions.

A significant opportunity for maximizing process productivity is seen in students' engagement in dialogue with native speakers of diverse national cultures within our country. The polyethnic composition of academic groups, in this context, promotes a better understanding of one's connection to national musical culture and an awareness of universal cultural patterns. Intercultural interaction is a valuable aspect of education, contributing to the development of understanding, respect, and cooperation among students from different cultural backgrounds. The feelings of empathy and participation experienced by students can reinforce the inclination towards collaboration and tolerance. Students' self-awareness as an integral part of the national musical space contributes to the genuine humanization of the educational and upbringing processes, and their comprehension of the dialectical unity of world and national musical culture. The values embedded in polyethnic cultures can serve as a foundation for the development of a future educator possessing personal qualities such as humanism, tolerance, knowledge of their state's history and traditions, and the ability to both preserve their own (native) culture and be ready for cooperation and interaction with other national cultures. This includes the capacity to create and popularize supranational culture and values. In other words, the musical educational space must consider the specific mentality of students, focus on the existing opportunities within the group for the preservation and development of the native language, culture, and religious views of representatives of various ethnic groups, as well as on the conditions created within the university for the formation and development of students' supra-ethnic interests. These conditions should reflect the use of diverse models and methods, including those from other disciplines, specifically:

- "Thematizing" world music.
- Basing education on the model of anti-racist peace education.
- Promoting musical tolerance and diversity.

- Providing learners with opportunities for independent work on their own music and the music of other communities [11].

In conclusion, when organizing interactions within a polyethnic vocal ensemble, future educators should adhere to the fundamental principles of intercultural dialogue. In this specific context, this translates to offering and encouraging a multiplicity of self-expression options in music. Students are also to be made aware of the advantages of intercultural dialogue within ensemble work. These include: broadening students' musical horizons, fostering intercultural understanding and respect, enhancing collaboration and communication skills, elevating intercultural competence, and creating an inclusive and dynamic environment for learning and creativity.

To summarize the above, the organization of interaction within a polyethnic children's vocal ensemble lays the foundation for cultivating an emotionally charged, positive attitude towards multicultural particularities in students. This attitude is grounded in knowledge, understanding, and acceptance of the traditions of different peoples, along with a respectful disposition towards their cultural values and ways of life. Consequently, their ethnic sentiments develop, and the foundations of interethnic relations culture are laid within a multicultural community. This fosters mutual understanding and constructive communication with individuals of other ethnic groups, enabling students to participate in intercultural dialogue and internalize a system of norms and rules for intercultural interaction. The didactic experience presented in this article is but a small fraction of the vast array of forms and methods recommended for implementation in the training process of future music pedagogy specialists. In each specific case, and for each given academic group, considering its particular polyethnic composition, unique, non-standard, and personalized approaches are necessary for the successful resolution of this issue.

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