

Comparing Approaches to Music Education in Malaysia and Bulgaria: Progress Towards a Qualitative Study

Nikolay Tomov Demerdzhiev
Johann Sebastian Bach Music Academy, Hong Kong

Abstract

This article is a working paper that previews the next stage in an ongoing comparative study. It explores nodal situations (Bode, 2013) within music education in Bulgaria (Demerdzhiev, 2024b) and compares them to the findings of a grounded theory-based study of the education of gifted music students, conducted in Malaysia from 2017 to 2019 (Demerdzhiev 2021a, 2024a). While Western-style music education tends to prioritize curriculum, evaluation, and technical equipment (López-Íñiguez & Westerlund, 2023), traditional music education in Southeast Asia and Southeast Europe places more emphasis on the teacher-student relationship and the development of students' artistic personalities, alongside instrumental technique (Brand, 2006; Demerdzhiev 2021a). Recent studies indicate that this holistic approach is crucial for nurturing young people's musical talents (Bork, 2016; McPherson, 2016; Gagné, 2023, López-Íñiguez, & McPherson, 2023). The project seeks to facilitate mutual learning and capacity improvement while encouraging a critical review of music education programs in both regions and beyond.

Keywords: Change, Comparative research, Gifted music education, Narratives, Qualitative studies

Theoretical Framework

Culture and arts schools in Bulgaria offer professional education in the arts, including music, for gifted students. Their framework has been discussed in comparative research (Demerdzhiev, 2024b) with a research sample from Sultan Idris Education University (UPSI), in Perak, Malaysia (Demerdzhiev, 2021a). The first paper in this study investigated the challenges associated with the transformation process of Bulgaria's music schools into a culture and art education system within the country's education framework from 1989 to the present day. The second part of the study developed the theoretical sampling process (central case sampling) of the preliminary comparative study. Acknowledging the influence of unfolding stories and narratives in driving change in music education (Westerlund 2020), new interview data were gathered in the summer of 2023. The two previous studies and the additional data are here analysed in the context of the transformation process to gain a deeper understanding of what might be considered 'successful' and sustainable change, given the new aims of Bulgaria's culture and art schools. The findings confirm that music education in Bulgaria is indeed shifting towards new transdisciplinary opportunities, but the process is not without its problems,

and new legislation is probably needed. One particular music school project in Sliwen stood out as a potential model for transforming the Bulgarian music education system. The project has been characterised by collaboration among stakeholders that include music schools, performing arts institutions, and tertiary education providers, nurturing students' passion and motivation to overcome challenges, and ensuring that students sustain their interest in music training in the long term.

In addition, the research has been conducted in the hope of exploring those 'nodes' or 'nodal situations' that are game changers that occur within uncertain contexts (according to Bode, 2013). It aims to capitalize on these findings and provide a concrete framework for how they can be integrated by policymakers. I believe this can happen through the power of the stories, since the power of stories, within institutions, lies in their ability to act as mediators between social structures and individual agencies (cf. Faber 2002 and Westerlund 2020). Stories provide a space for new narratives, granting us new forms of agency and offering fresh choices and options (Faber 2002, p. 25; Westerlund 2020, p. 16).

Finally, the current working paper fits into the broader theoretical framework of cooperative professionalism and trans-