

# Re-Design and Revision of Music Education Program in an Elementary School in RN Macedonia

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## ABSTRACT

Music education, acknowledged globally for its profound impact on emotional and cognitive development, is compulsory in primary schools in many countries worldwide. This study explores the challenges and perspectives of implementing music education in elementary schools in the Republic of North Macedonia. For decades, this subject was represented by two weekly classes dedicated to musical folklore, choral tradition, and playing instruments. Since 2020, this tradition has been broken by implementing a new curriculum with one-class-per-week schedule. Such circumstances inevitably impose limitations on teaching all the contents of this subject and shortening the repertoire for singing and playing. Therefore, this paper aims to shed light on the impediments faced by generalists, considering the class time, teaching resources, and other constraints. The qualitative research on viewpoints and experiences of generalists was conducted in Primary School Tefeyyuz in Skopje in 2023. The findings indicate that the implementation of music education is significantly hindered by the small number of classes, inadequate distribution of teaching topics, a lack of textbooks and practicums, and insufficient musical equipment. Respondents expressed concerns about the impact of these constraints on their ability to cover the entire curriculum and provide a well-rounded musical education experience for students, because the reduction in class time often forces educators to narrow the curriculum, focusing only on the most essential topics. This can lead to a reduction in the breadth of musical education, where students miss out on important experiences.

*Keywords: Music education; elementary school; curriculum; RN Macedonia.*

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## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Teaching in elementary school is one of the most essential areas of the teaching profession. This cycle of education, considered to have a large part in the education and upbringing of a new generation, is a strategic turning point that will affect the achievement of modern educational levels among this population.

Studying music on a global scale begins from the earliest age in the upbringing and education of the young population. Music education within the educational process has a significant role in the overall development of children and is reflected in a person's individual, social, cultural, and academic functions (Ucan, 2005; Yavuzer, 1996: 220). According to the World Health Organization (WHO), music - listening or practicing brings positive experiences and well-being to people regardless of age and culture [1]. In addition, engaging in musical activities improves other non-musical skills, such as verbal, social skills, and intelligence (Bugos & DeMarie, [2], Cirelli et al., [3], Francois et al., 2013; Jaschke et al., [4], Kirschen & Tomassello, [5], Linnavelli et al., [6], Moreno et al., [7], Jakobson et al., [8], Brandler & Rammsayer, [9], Schellenberg et al.; [10] Ilari, [11].

Studying the subject of music education in European curricula is justified by three reasons that may have an impact:

1. Internal child development that is related to the development of musical skills and knowledge,
2. Knowledge, understanding and appreciation of cultural environment and heritage,
3. Development of an individual and a society through creativity, identity formation, personal development, and social interaction (The European Network for Communication and Knowledge Management of Music Education.  
Available:<http://menet.mdw.ac.at/menetsite/english/topics.html>. 17.09.2011).

The music education subject has a complementary, supportive, creative, and progressive function and represents an effective educational tool (Sun, 1969; Yıldız, [12]. Class teachers should have basic knowledge and skills about music to successfully implement the curriculum in this subject at the desired level [13]. For effective teaching, class planning regarding concepts and activities is even more important when students have a class only once a week. Teaching is not only about what the student can do but also about what they know and have learned. It is not enough for them to be able to sing or play a piece; they must also understand through analysis and interpretation what they are singing and playing and understand how to achieve different ways of singing and playing certain pieces of music. Repetition at the beginning of each class is also important because of the correlation of the contents. Students should recall the concept of what they learned last time to achieve continuation and application of that learning [14].

The primary education in RN Macedonia lasts nine years, with the first five classes taught by generalists and the remaining classes taught by subject teachers. Music

education is a compulsory subject, and in the class teaching from the first to the fifth grade, this subject is taught by the class teachers. In the current curriculum for the first fifth grade introduced on September 1, 2020 (Article 30 paragraph 3 of the Law on Primary Education, "Official Gazette of RNM" No. 161/19 and 229/20) the number of classes for the subject of music education has been reduced to one class per week, which is twice less than in the previous one (Curriculum from 2007, "Official Gazette of the Republic of Macedonia" No. 44/95, 24/96, 34/96, 35/97, 82/99, 29/ 02, 40/03, 42/03, 63/04, 82/04, 55/05, 81/05, 113/05, 35/36, 70/06 and 51/07). These changes are reflected in the shortening of the teaching topics, i.e., of the overall content of the musical subject, and indicate a superficial approach to musical art.

**Table 1. The current curriculum of music education from 2020/21**

Teaching topics	I grade	II grade	III grade	IV grade	V grade
We are listening to music	18	18	18	18	18
We are singing, playing and dancing	18	18	18	18	18
<b>Total</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>36</b>

**Table 2. Previous curriculum of music education**

Teaching topics	I grade	II grade	III grade	IV grade	V grade
Singing	20	20	19	10	10
Listening to music	12	12	12	15	15
Musical literacy	3	3	6	25	25
Playing children's musical instruments	4	4	8	8	8
Music and movement	25	25	19	/	/
Children's musical creation	8	8	8	3	3
Music grammar	/	/	/	4	4
Folk art creation	/	/	/	7	7
<b>Total</b>	<b>72</b>	<b>72</b>	<b>72</b>	<b>72</b>	<b>72</b>

In Tables 1 and 2, which show the current and former curriculum for the Music Education subject for class teaching, a shortened number of classes and teaching topics can be seen. What stands out is the inadequate distribution of the teaching topics of the current program according to the number of classes. Namely, with the latest program, only two teaching topics are provided: *Listening to music* and *Singing, playing and dancing*. Half of the planned number of classes (18) is related to the topic of *Listening to music*, and the remaining 18 classes are for the second teaching topic *Singing, playing, and dancing*, which requires much greater engagement. In particular, playing children's musical instruments and singing by reading the notation implies knowledge of musical symbols, that is, mastering certain levels of musical literacy, which is not set aside as an individual topic.

Therefore, challenges such as adapting to a condensed schedule and balancing the curriculum requirements for all teaching topics inevitably arise.

Such circumstances inevitably impose time limitations on teachers regarding teaching this subject's contents and shortening the repertoire for singing and playing. That is why class teachers face difficulties concerning the timeframe for realizing music education classes. Because of all this, in this paper, we will refer to music education in grade teaching in elementary schools through a survey of teachers concerning conditions, way of working, and requirements for the effective implementation of this subject.

## **2. THEORIES RELATED TO MUSIC EDUCATION REDUCTION**

Reducing the number of music classes from two to one weekly in elementary school may have certain repercussions on students' music education and overall cognitive development. To understand the implications of such a change, it's essential to examine relevant educational theories and research on music education's role in child development.

Adaptive learning theory, which emphasizes the need for educational content to be tailored to student's individual learning paces and styles, faces challenges when instructional time is reduced. With fewer classes, the opportunity to adapt teaching methods and materials to individual needs is constrained. This can lead to a one-size-fits-all approach, where students who require more time to grasp musical concepts may struggle to keep up, potentially leading to decreased engagement and a lower overall quality of learning [15]. Learning is more effective when practice is spaced out over time, which is particularly relevant in music education. Music skills, including instrumental proficiency and vocal techniques, require consistent practice for mastery. Hence, according to this Distributed Practice Theory, reducing the frequency of music classes disrupts this spacing, potentially leading to less effective skill acquisition [16].

The theory that focuses on the mental effort required to process new information is Cognitive Load Theory (CLT) [17]. In the context of reducing music classes, students may face increased cognitive load in each session as teachers attempt to compress the same amount of material into fewer sessions. Music education often involves collaborative activities, such as group performances and peer feedback, which are essential for developing social skills. This art also supports the development of empathy and cultural understanding, which may be less emphasized in a reduced schedule [18]. Howard Gardner's Theory of Multiple Intelligences argues that musical intelligence is one of several distinct types of intelligence. Regular exposure to music education is crucial for nurturing this type of intelligence in students [19].

## **3. METHODS**

The thesis of this research is that the successful implementation of music education in grade teaching depends on the concept of the curriculum and the working experience of teachers.

The goal is to determine how suitable the music education curriculum is for learning the musical content and activities with the reduced number of lessons and the given distribution of the teaching topics. Hence, the main task was to examine the opinions of generalists about implementing the current music curriculum.

### **3.1 Study Group**

The research was conducted in the Tefeyyuz primary school in Skopje, the first and largest Turkish-language primary school in RN Macedonia. The case study was carried out in the academic year 2023/24, and the target group was all teachers who teach in grade school (N 17).

### **3.2 Data Collection Process**

In this study, data was collected through a semi-structured interview form prepared by the researchers. The questionnaire, with 50 questions, was grouped into three parts. In the first part, questions refer to respondents' data and information about the level of their musical education. The following two parts of this questionnaire refer to teachers' attitudes toward music education and the realization of the teaching content. Questions were of the open type in the first part, and in the second and third part, they were both open and closed type. A descriptive-explanatory methodology was applied, and the respondents' responses were processed with a content analysis method. The obtained data are shown in tables and percentages. Respondents' responses were processed using a descriptive-explanatory methodology with a content analysis method.

In addition to this study, free interviews were conducted with the respondents. The teachers talked about their current practices regarding the co-realization of music teaching topics, and these narratives were used in the data analysis.

### **3.3 Data Analysis**

The largest number of teachers are female (16), with equal representation from all classes. Most of them have 11 to 15 years of work experience, also, there are older teachers with 26 (1) and 22 (2) years of teaching experience, and the youngest one has 4 years.

All teachers have graduated from the Faculty of Pedagogy "St Climent Ohridski" (UKIM) in Skopje, and three completed master's degrees. According to the obtained diplomas from higher education, all the respondents have passed classes in the subject of music education, which includes studying musical instruments (keyboard, recorder, and Orff instruments) at the home faculty. The respondents have no additional musical education, apart from three who learned to play saz and guitar according to their preferences.

Most respondents agree that music education has an important role in raising and educating children, regardless of their musical predispositions. Therefore, love and interest in music should be encouraged in the classes (17), and they shouldn't be

replaced by other subjects (11). Teachers' opinions are unanimous that textbooks and manuals are necessary (17), and they also emphasize the need for their participation in any initiative to change the curriculum (17). Adequate teaching aids and musical instruments are also necessary for quality teaching (17) in music education. To realize the contents of teaching topics, most teachers use a computer (15) and a smart board (14), as well as a music system, CD, and DVD player (12) (Table 4).

**Table 3. Teachers' views on the importance and requirements regarding the subject of music education**

Teachers' views on music education	Frequency f	Percent %
Music education has a very important role in the development of children	17	100
Musical activities are very beneficial in the inclusion of children	10	58
Musical content should be interactive with other subjects	14	82
The application of ICT technology contributes to better teaching in music education	7	41
It is necessary to equip a school with teaching resources and musical instruments	17	100
Continuous training for musical activities is required for teachers	16	94
Consultation and participation of experienced grade teachers in curriculum change initiatives are necessary.	17	100

**Table 4. Use of teaching resources**

Teacher's views on using of teaching recourses	Frequency f	Percent %
Music system, CD, DVD player	12	70
Computer with Internet access	15	88
Smartboard	14	82
Keyboards	7	41

**Table 5. Teaching topic - We are listening to music**

Listening to music	Frequency f	Percent %
I regularly use visual aids (videos, photos, etc.)	15	88
After listening, I practice analyzing musical works	15	88
Recognition of vocal and instrumental ensembles	15	88
Determining the character of a work	15	88
Determining the tempo of a work	13	76
Determining the dynamic plan of a work	6	35
Expressing the music work through visual art	6	35

Regarding the realization of teaching, we conducted questions according to the teaching topics provided in the curriculum.

Preliminary findings suggest that the allocation of half of the total number of lessons to the topic of *listening to music* has allowed teachers to dedicate more time to its coverage. Most of the teachers use visual aids - videos and photos (15), to analyze the musical and expressive elements of a piece (15), thereby determining its vocal-instrumental structure (15), character (15), tempo (13), and dynamics (6). Some of the teachers also apply children's artistic expression to the music they listen to (6). In the open-ended responses, many of the teachers believe that number of classes planned for this teaching topic is large at the expense of other contents.

Tables 6 and 7 show the teachers' answers about choosing a repertoire and implementing singing activities.

**Table 6. Teaching topic - We are singing**

<b>How do you present and teach the songs?</b>	<b>Frequency f</b>	<b>Percent %</b>
Through a vocal performance	3	17
Through a sound medium	13	76
Through singing and playing an instrument (keyboard)	1	5

Regarding the teaching topic of *singing*, all teachers declared that they do not have enough lessons to process an extensive repertoire of songs and repeat them with the accompaniment of children's musical instruments. As for the songs that are mainly learned by hearing, in most cases, teachers present them with a CD or DVD player (13). Only one teacher performs the song by singing and playing on the keyboard. All teachers choose songs according to specific thematic content due to the interactive teaching as well as holidays.

**Table 7. Teaching topic - We are singing**

<b>What do you pay attention to when choosing a new song</b>	<b>Frequency f</b>	<b>Percent %</b>
Words should be appropriate for the age	10	59
Melody should be in the optimal range	9	52
Appropriate rhythmic structure	8	47
Topics due to the interactive teaching and holidays	17	100

**Table 8. Teaching topic - We are playing**

<b>Playing children's musical instruments</b>	<b>Frequency f</b>	<b>Percent %</b>
Playing recorders	17	100
Performance of rhythmic examples by clapping hands	10	59
Accompanying the songs with rhythmic instruments	5	29
Accompanying the songs with rhythmic and melodic instruments	2	11

Statement of a teacher with more than 30 years of experience: "With the current curriculum, an imbalance has been created in terms of the number of classes and

teaching content. For those reasons, we have to shorten the repertoire of songs sung and played with children's musical instruments for certain teaching topics."

Statement of a teacher with 15 years of experience: "Due to the reduction in the number of classes, we do not have time to repeat the processed content, which reflects on the level of acquired knowledge among the children."

The theme of *playing* is represented through studying and playing recorders (17). As an accompaniment when singing, they mostly use hand clapping (10), and sometimes some rhythmic instruments such as maracas, sticks, and drums (5).

**Table 9. Teaching topic - We are dancing**

Which of the following exercises do you practice?	Frequency f	Percent %
Exercises for developing a sense of rhythm	8	47
Coordination of movements with musical characteristics	7	41
Preparation of choreography	5	29
The practice of musical dramatization	4	23
Introducing Folk Dances	15	88

In the teaching topic of *dancing*, the most significant number of respondents stated that they introduced children to folk art (15), applied exercises for developing a sense of rhythm (8), and coordinated movements with musical characteristics (7). Considering the time limitation, only a part of them managed to prepare choreography (5), as well as musical dramatization (4). Contents from musical literacy and children's musical expression and creation are also integrated into the thematic unit *We are singing, playing, and dancing*. All teachers unanimously declared that this thematic unit is very extensive and requires experience in the distribution and realization of the set goals because of the small number of classes.

Although the teaching topics of *musical literacy* and *children's musical creativity* are not listed in the current curriculum, we were interested in how teachers implement them in teaching.

**Table 10. Teaching topic - Musical literacy**

Musical literacy	Frequency f	Percent %
Musical notes	11	64
Rhythm duration	10	59
Volume and timbre of sound	4	23

According to the answers, teachers mostly pay attention to teaching musical notes and rhythm but do not have enough time to teach other contents of music theory such as volume, the timbre of sound, etc. [20].

The musical creation activities are mostly realized by encouraging musical expression through voice, playing, and movement (5), coming up with



choreography (4), and music games (3), and less often they practice independent creation of short melodic sequences (2).

**Table 11. Teaching topic - Children’s musical creativity**

Which of the following exercises do you practice?	Frequency f	Percent %
Encouraging musical expression through voice, playing, and movement	5	29
Complementing musical notes in a written melodic sentence	/	/
Independent creation of short melodic sequences	2	11
Text improvisation for a given melody	/	/
Music games	3	17
Coming up with choreography	4	23

From the free interviews with some of the teachers, we received the following answers to the question regarding the implementation of all teaching topics in the conditions of a reduced number of music classes:

Testimony of a teacher with 26 years of working experience: "With fewer classes, we struggle to cover all required content areas, including practical skills like playing instruments and understanding musical theory [21,22]. I think it results in a narrower curriculum focus, with less emphasis on the diverse aspects of music education that contribute to a well-rounded education."

Teacher with 22 years of working experience: "We all face increased pressure to deliver comprehensive music education within a limited time frame. In my opinion, it leads to higher stress levels among us and a potential decline in the quality of instruction, as we are forced to prioritize certain content over others, potentially neglecting important areas of musical learning."

Teacher with 14 years of experience: "Teaching topics musical literacy and children's musical expression are not represented as separate ones in the curriculum. This causes a problem in planning and organizing the class contents as these two segments are very important in music education."

Teacher with 4 years of working experience: "To efficiently organize the content of music education, we all implement an annual curriculum based on the experiences of colleagues with longer working experience because it is very difficult to cover everything in the limited time"[23].

#### **4. DISCUSSION, CONCLUSION, AND SUGGESTIONS**

According to the initial thesis and teachers' statements, the main problem for successfully implementing music education is shortening the number of classes from 1 to 5 grades with the same scope of the curriculum. However, the inadequate distribution of teaching topics according to the number of classes is even more significant.

Only two teaching topics are provided in the actual program: Listening to music (18 classes) and singing, playing, and dancing (18 classes). The second topic requires greater engagement because it covers more different content that requires musical engagement and rehearsal of teachers and students. In particular, playing children's musical instruments and singing by musical notes implies knowledge of musical symbols, that is, mastering certain levels of musical literacy. Such circumstances represent a time limitation for teachers when teaching all the contents of music education.

This situation is partially compensated by the mandatory correlation of some contents of music education with the rest of the teaching subjects (mother tongue, mathematics, introduction to nature and society, fine arts). Another difficulty is the lack of handbooks, manuals, teaching aids, and instruments. Given that there are no music education workbooks with an appropriate repertoire of musical content and activities, teachers devote particular time to their selection and concept. All surveyed teachers in this research answered that they mainly rely on the repertoire they studied during their studies, as well as on a selection of children's songs from the Internet.

The insufficient number of classes also reflects on the possibilities for repeating, determining, and practicing musical content and activities. Since repetition of the content contributes to maximizing learning, the surveyed teachers believe that this leads to a certain superficiality in the study of this subject, especially in the 4th and 5th grades when certain teaching topics are intensified, such as literacy and playing melodic instruments.

Therefore, respondents believe that the reduction of the number of classes in the long term can be reflected in the acquired knowledge in this area but also in the general benefits of musical art that have an impact on the development of a child's personality. Teachers expressed concerns about the impact of these constraints on their ability to cover the entire curriculum and provide a well-rounded musical education experience for students. In such circumstances, the expectations and criteria of teachers also decrease.

This paper underscores the challenges faced by educators in RN Macedonia in implementing music education within the confines of the existing educational system. Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive approach involving policymakers, educators, and stakeholders to enhance the curriculum, provide necessary resources, and improve the overall conditions for music education in primary schools. The insights gained from this study can inform future strategies aimed at optimizing the delivery of music education, ensuring its continued positive impact on the cognitive and emotional development of students in RN Macedonia.

Based on all these findings, we propose to increase the number of lessons in music education in primary education to twice a week as a long-standing tradition. In every strategy for a new curriculum in the future, professors from the faculties of education, as well as teachers from practice, should be consulted. A teacher should have a clear concept, to know exactly what to do, to know how to plan the

teaching content. In that sense, for the effective organization of the music education classes, we propose:

- Compulsory publication of handbooks and practicum on music education for each grade of primary education.
- The program should be balanced, with an adequate distribution of classes according to teaching topics.
- Participation of children in additional musical activities with singing, playing children's musical instruments, and dancing, with small choral ensembles in each school.
- Priority of children's individual needs and supporting students with excellent grades regardless of their natural potential (if they can't sing, to engage in some other musical activity).
- Investing in teaching aids, primarily in equipping with musical instruments.
- To remind the fact that musical arts contribute to many benefits for children, especially in facilitating the learning of other subjects and the development of academic skills.
- Policymakers and educational leaders should carefully consider these potential repercussions and seek ways to mitigate the negative impacts of such curricular changes.

#### **DISCLAIMER (ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE)**

Author(s) hereby declare that NO generative AI technologies such as Large Language Models (ChatGPT, COPILOT, etc.) and text-to-image generators have been used during the writing or editing of manuscripts.

#### **COMPETING INTERESTS**

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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