

Music Education in the Development of Empathy in Adolescence

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Author Bio

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Abstract

Empathy, crucial for human relationships, undergoes significant development during adolescence. Empathy versus sympathy is an important distinction because empathy requires someone to feel another person's emotions. This literature review discusses music education for adolescents to develop cognitive empathy. Through the synthesis of studies from trusted databases and academic sources, evidence shows a strong correlation between music education and the development of cognitive empathy, including taking music classes in a group setting and private music lessons. There can be limitations for adolescents to access music education based on economic reasons or if the school offers music education, but music education has many benefits. Music education emerges as a potent tool for fostering empathetic skills in adolescents, suggesting a need for its broader integration into educational curricula.

Introduction

Empathy is a fundamental aspect of human social interaction. The term empathy can be defined as the ability to understand and share the feelings of another (Evans, 2023). As empathy helps hold relationships together, understanding other people's emotions is crucial in relationships. With the importance of empathy in relationships, it is essential to consider how an individual can grow and develop empathy. One of the main components of empathy is cognitive empathy, the understanding of emotions ("Empathy definition: what is empathy," n.d.). Similar to other skills, empathy and the understanding of emotions can be practiced. Also, it is essential to consider how someone's environment influences the skill of empathy. By observing an environment, one can understand different emotions; most of this development of understanding emotions occurs during adolescence. Adolescence is when considerable emotional, cognitive, and social development occur—all factors influencing empathy ("Empathy definition: what is empathy," n.d.).

As empathy evolves greatly during adolescence, it is important to consider how adolescents can take advantage of developing this essential skill. Empathy education can be implemented into a curriculum, such as in music classes. Exposure to music classes and music education can increase adolescents' ability to recognize emotions in a group setting and also practice perspective-taking skills. Music education fosters both these skills which are a part of developing cognitive empathy (Rabinowitch et al., 2012; Kiarostami et al., 2022; Wu & Lu, 2021).

Methodology

For this literature review, many scholarly resources were used to compose a comprehensive understanding and deep analysis. This literature review was carried out to select relevant articles from trusted databases such as Google Scholar, PubMed, and JSTOR. When searching through these databases, keywords such as "Empathy," "Empathy Education for Adolescents," "Music Education," "Music Education Developing Empathy," and more terms were used to compile articles. Additionally, articles from universities were used due to the professors' specialties

in empathy or music. By harnessing scholarly research, this review aims to gain a robust understanding of the impact of music education on adolescent empathy, enhancing the comprehension of educational policies and their societal responses.

Defining Empathy.

Empathy is fundamentally defined as the capacity to understand and share the feelings or emotions of another person (Evans, 2023). Although the terms "empathy" and "sympathy" are often used interchangeably, the two have distinct meanings (Evans, 2023). Sympathy refers to a feeling of pity or concern for someone's misfortune (Evans, 2023). The distinction between sympathy and empathy lies in the level of emotional involvement: sympathy maintains a level of detachment, representing an understanding of feelings, whereas empathy requires an individual to resonate with and share another person's feelings (Evans, 2023; Brown, 2016). The focus of this paper is on empathy and its role in fostering closer interpersonal relationships through emotional proximity. In contrast, sympathy might inadvertently create emotional distance. Researchers generally categorize empathy into two domains: affective empathy, which entails experiencing sensations and feelings in response to others' emotions, and cognitive empathy, which is the ability to recognize and comprehend others' emotions ("Empathy definition: what is empathy," n.d.).

This paper specifically examines the development of cognitive empathy in adolescents. The skill of cognitive empathy, which is based on recognizing and understanding emotions, is predominantly developed in adolescence ("Empathy definition: what is empathy," n.d.; "The psychology of emotional and cognitive empathy," n.d.). While empathy is partially innate, research indicates that it is a malleable skill, especially cognitive empathy, which can be nurtured over time (Dadds, 2007; "Empathy: A skill you can learn," 2022; "The psychology of emotional and cognitive empathy," n.d.).

Cognitive Empathy Development

While certain individuals may possess a genetic predisposition toward empathy—with evidence suggesting that females often exhibit a

stronger baseline of empathy than males (Toussaint & Webb, 2005)—empathy is notably influenced and shaped by social experiences and interactions (Clarke, 2023). Psychologist Albert Bandura’s Social Learning Theory provides a foundational framework for understanding this nurturing process of empathy. Bandura posited that humans absorb knowledge through a synthesis of cognitive and behavioral processes, with environmental interactions being central to this learning process (Bandura, 1977; Bandura, 1985). He delineated observing, modeling, and imitation as primary mechanisms of social learning and further articulated that successful learning through these elements requires attention, retention, skill reproduction, and motivation (Bandura, 1977; Bandura, 1985).

When the Social Learning Theory is applied to empathy, it underscores the vast potential for enhancing empathic capabilities, particularly cognitive empathy. The act of understanding and internalizing another’s feelings demands keen observation—a core principle of Bandura’s theory (Bandura, 1977; Bandura, 1985; Gerdes et al., 2011). Given that empathy can be cultivated through environmental influences, it becomes imperative to explore how a curriculum can be designed to facilitate empathy development in adolescents (Gerdes et al., 2011).

Developing Empathy Through a Curriculum

Research underscores that empathy, like many other skills, is malleable and can be cultivated over time (Toussaint & Webb, 2005; Ratka, 2018). Like many skills, empathy can be practiced in different ways. However, it is crucial to recognize the influence of an adolescent’s personal values and emotional regulation on empathy development (Sike et al., 2018).

The school environment, including extracurricular activities, plays a pivotal role in fostering empathy among adolescents (Sike et al., 2018). As adolescents engage with peers from diverse backgrounds, students are exposed to varied cultures and experiences (Sike et al., 2018). This exposure nurtures awareness and appreciation of differing worldviews, a vital facet of cognitive empathy (Sike et al., 2018).

Specific techniques within curricular settings can be employed to bolster empathic skills. For example, enhancing communication has been shown to amplify empathy (Ratka, 2018). Empathy can be taught through role-playing situations because it practices perspective-taking, which is a cornerstone of cognitive empathy (Gerdes et al., 2011). As adolescents practice perspective-taking, they are able to become more aware of other people’s emotions and develop cognitive empathy (Gerdes et al., 2011).

The inclusion of art in curricula also presents a potent way to enhance cognitive empathy, particularly in helping adolescents recognize and interpret emotions (Gerdes et al., 2011). In fact, a 2012 study revealed that adolescents who engaged in acting classes exhibited improved empathy (Goldstein & Winner, 2012). The role-playing practices that occur in theater and acting allow adolescents to increase their ability to understand emotions (Goldstein & Winner, 2012).

Beyond the arts, sports serve as platforms for empathy development (Learning to be with others: Using sport to develop empathy, 2022). The team dynamics, interactions, and emotional connections fostered in sporting environments are conducive to understanding and sharing emotions with others (Learning to be with others: Using sport to develop empathy 2022).

Notably, of all activities, music education emerges as a potent instrument in honing cognitive empathy. Numerous studies highlight the nexus between melodic expressions and human emotions, reinforcing the power of music in bridging emotional understanding (Castro & Lima, 2014; Wu & Lu, 2021).

Music Education and Empathy

Music has long been recognized as a powerful medium to express and interpret emotions, and its role in cultivating empathy cannot be overlooked. A critical connection emerges between music and empathy within the intricate networks of the brain, primarily centered in the limbic system, particularly the amygdala (Evans, 2023; Jäncke, 2008; Pour & D’Costa, 2022). This neural overlap underscores the direct link between musical experiences and empathic responses (Kiarostami et al., 2022; Pour & D’Costa, 2022).

As a behavioral intervention, music can foster empathy through social understanding. Music leverages empathy's multifaceted nature—emotional, cognitive, and social—by prompting individuals to relate the musical content to their own thoughts and feelings (Wu & Lu, 2021). Studies have been conducted with adolescents who have received a music education and ones who have not received a music education to test their empathy (Rabinowitch et al., 2012; Kiarostami et al., 2022; Wu & Lu 2021).

For instance, in 2012, Rabinowitch conducted a study of music education in a group setting with adolescents, which showed adolescents who were exposed to group music education were able to significantly improve their empathy scores throughout the study, while this did not occur for the control group (Rabinowitch et al., 2012). Group music education improves adolescents' ability to develop skills for recognizing emotions, which is cognitive empathy (Rabinowitch et al., 2012). Empathy is cultivated through processes akin to those seen in music playing, involving sharing emotions, imitation, synchrony, and collaboration (Rabinowitch et al., 2012; Wu & Lu, 2021). So when adolescents practice music education in a group setting, like in the study, they are able to develop the cognitive empathy skills of understanding emotions through collaboration (Rabinowitch et al., 2012; Wu & Lu, 2021). Such collaborative processes might underscore the development of perspective-taking, a crucial component of empathy.

Similarly to the 2012 study, in 2022, Kiarostami ran a study with eight different types of music education to test if empathy, including perspective-taking, would develop in adolescents (Kiarostami et al., 2022). Kiarostami's study shows a significant increase in empathy skills for all eight groups of adolescents who had music education (Kiarostami et al., 2022). Also, in the 2022 study, there was a 50% increase in perspective-taking for the music education groups showing that cognitive empathy increased with music education (Kiarostami et al., 2022).

Music can open the doors to adolescence by bringing them together by promoting communication and the recognition of emotions, and the longer exposure an adolescent has to music education, the more they can improve their cognitive empathy by recognizing emotions through music. (Castro & Lima, 2014; Wu & Lu, 2021; Kiarostami et al., 2022)

Limitations

Research shows that both group-based music education classes and a variety of music education programs indicated an increase in empathy for adolescents who participate. However, further research is needed to explore the difference between empathy development in group-based music education and individual music education in adolescents. However, the benefits that the two provide should not be overlooked. Music education should be implemented into adolescents' curriculum due to the development of empathy.

Furthermore, the disparity between music education provisions in public versus private schools is noteworthy. Many public schools, constrained by economic challenges, may not provide the same level of access to music education as their private counterparts (Commentary, 2022). This disparity could potentially impact students' scale and nature of empathy development.

Additionally, this paper omits an in-depth exploration of neural pathway development during adolescence due to its complex nature and limited time to perform research for the paper. Nonetheless, neural pathway development plays a pivotal role in psychological transformations during adolescence, encompassing shifts in identity, self-awareness, and peer evaluations (Blakemore, 2012). These significant changes can influence adolescents' perceptions of emotions—both their own and their peers—which, in turn, can affect their progression in cognitive empathy (Blakemore, 2012).

Conclusion

In conclusion, empathy, a cornerstone of human interaction, plays an indispensable role in forging and maintaining meaningful relationships. The importance of its development during the formative adolescent years cannot be understated. This review underscores the significant interplay between music education and the cultivation of cognitive empathy among adolescents. Music, with its profound emotional resonance and capacity to communicate complex sentiments, emerges as a potent medium for enhancing empathetic understanding. While art

classes, such as acting, offer role-playing opportunities and sports promote group interactions for empathy development, music possesses a unique ability to tap directly into emotional spectra and facilitate nuanced emotional recognition. As demonstrated through the cited studies, group music education not only facilitates the recognition and understanding of emotions but also promotes collaboration, an essential component of cognitive empathy. Additionally, other studies exemplified how music education promotes perspective-taking. It is paramount for educators and policymakers to recognize the potential of music as a tool for fostering empathy. Integrating music education more prominently into curricula could be an investment in nurturing a more empathetic, understanding, and cohesive future generation. As the global community grapples with increasing socio-cultural divides, such endeavors in education can act as bridges, harnessing the universal language of music to cultivate empathy.

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