Bridging Theory to Practice: A Theoretical Exploration of Core Competencies in Choral Conducting Lessons for Middle School Students in China

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ABSTRACT

The increasing significance of the core competencies in choral conducting courses for middle school students stems from the fact that they help foster a social environment and develop their emotional and social intelligence capacities. This paper discusses a theoretical exploration of developing content standards for choral conducting lessons in middle schools in China, which aims to propose a comprehensive and practical choral conducting class environment meant for localization. The paper concentrates on the choral conducting lessons content standard as outlined in the 2022 Chinese Music Curriculum Standards. It incorporates social-emotional learning theory, and self-efficacy theory to develop the choral conducting lesson content standard elements by integrating cognitive, affective, and psychomotor domains. The authors provide insights for music educators and students, emphasizing the importance of overcoming obstacles for choral conducting lessons in middle school in China.

Key words: Choral Conducting Education, Chinese Curriculum, Content Standard, Middle School Music Education, Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

INTRODUCTION

Choral conducting lessons are infrequently designed for middle school students but are often found in university programs aiming to train professional conductors. However, a sustainable music environment like the choral conducting lesson provides much value for middle school students. The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning [1] identified that self-awareness, social awareness, responsible decision-making, self-management, and relationship skills are essential elements of social-emotional learning. These core competencies are increasingly important for students. Since the music classroom is a complex academic and social environment where the music teacher has strong potential for student influence both personally and musically [2]. The choral conducting music educational environment contributes to supporting these efforts.

In China, a significant challenge in choral conducting education lies in the absence of comprehensive and progressive guidance for middle school curricula. The 2022 Chinese Curriculum Standards recognize the importance of choral conducting at the middle school level (grades 8-9), emphasizing the need for students to develop basic conducting skills such as interpreting 2/4, 3/4, and 4/4 time signatures and effectively leading their peers [3]. The curriculum also encourages students to demonstrate creative expression, evaluate performances, and apply their skills to enhance group singing. These standards aim to establish a foundation for both technical competence and expressive musicality. However, current teaching materials fall short in addressing these objectives comprehensively, resulting in a superficial understanding of conducting techniques in this area.

One critical gap in the current curriculum is the lack of cultural diversity in conducting repertoires. While the Chinese Curriculum Standards emphasize the importance of fostering cultural diversity, the materials primarily focus on Chinese songs, limiting students' exposure to a wide array of musical traditions. This narrow scope restricts students' ability to appreciate global cultural contexts and hinders their development of a holistic perspective. As a result, students are often unable to explore the intersection of music, emotions, and cultural diversity in a meaningful way, missing opportunities to use choral conducting as a medium for cultural exchange and empathy.

To address these challenges, this study aims to develop choral conducting content standards aligned with the 2022 Chinese Music Curriculum for middle schools. These standards seek to enhance the choral conducting curriculum by integrating structured and systematic approaches that foster technical skills, creative expression, and cultural awareness. By spreading awareness among music educators about the benefits of well-developed and validated content standards, this research will provide teachers with practical tools for improving their choral conducting instruction.

This paper outlines the research process and stages involved in formulating these content standards, including the conceptualization of ideas, theoretical consideration, and the formulation of conceptual and theoretical framework. By addressing existing gaps in choral conducting education, this study aims to establish a more effective and meaningful approach to teaching choral conducting at the middle school, ultimately fostering better educational outcomes and enriching students' musical experiences.

Conceptualization of Research Ideas

This section outlines the process undertaken to conceptualize research ideas for developing choral conducting content standards in alignment with the Chinese Music Curriculum Standards for middle schools. To gain a comprehensive understanding of the current state of music education, the researchers reviewed key sources, including the curriculum standards, teaching materials, and reports on the implementation of the curriculum in both domestic and international schools. These reviews highlighted the curriculum's emphasis on several middle-year learning objectives, such as the ability to comprehend emotions and ideas conveyed through music, engage in improvisation and composition, foster teamwork, and build connections with Chinese culture and global perspectives [3].

Grounded in the curriculum's core literacy orientation, this study explores how choral conducting content standards can promote the development of students' core competencies, including critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and cultural understanding. These competencies are essential for preparing students to engage meaningfully with music as both an academic and expressive discipline. Building on these foundational ideas, the study referenced the Chinese Music Curriculum Standards to define three key objectives for choral conducting education:

1) Basic Conducting Techniques and Performance: Develop the ability to use basic conducting patterns to lead others in 2/4, 3/4, and 4/4 time signatures.
2) Score Study and Analysis: Build skills in recognizing and interpreting music scores to read simple music fluently.
3) Collaboration and Communication: Cultivate the ability to evaluate one's own performance as well as that of peers or groups, provide constructive feedback, and help others improve singing skills and expression. Guide ensembles to respond accurately to conducting gestures while maintaining musical coherence [3].

These objectives address both technical and interpersonal aspects of choral conducting, ensuring that students develop the skills required to lead, analyze, and collaborate effectively.

The initial objectives were further refined to incorporate a detailed focus on:

1) Practical Conducting Techniques: Emphasizing clarity and precision in conducting gestures for effective ensemble leadership.
2) Cultural Relevance: Connecting choral repertoire to Chinese cultural heritage and global traditions to foster deeper cultural understanding.
3) Emotional Expression: Encouraging students to use conducting as a medium to convey the emotional content of music and inspire ensemble members.

This refinement ensures the choral conducting content standards are aligned with the holistic approach of the 2022 Chinese Music Curriculum Standards, which prioritize technical mastery, emotional engagement, and cultural awareness in the middle-year stage. The conceptualization process forms the theoretical foundation for developing choral conducting content standards. By aligning the standards with the Chinese educational context and integrating global insights, this study ensures the proposed framework is both relevant and practical for enhancing middle school music education.

Theoretical Consideration

The release of Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives [4] introduced a common framework for designing learning objectives and evaluating academic achievement aimed to classify educational goals to evaluate student performance. The taxonomy divides objectives into three domains: cognitive, focusing on knowledge recall and intellectual skill development; affective, involving changes in attitudes, values, and appreciations; and psychomotor, related to motor skills.

While Benjamin Bloom edited the handbook on the cognitive domain [4], the affective domain was later coauthored by Bloom, Krathwohl, and Masia [5]. Although the psychomotor domain was not included in the original taxonomy due to a lack of documented objectives, subsequent works by Harrow [6] and Simpson [7] addressed this gap. Since its publication, the taxonomy has been applied across various disciplines, including psychology, education, and engineering, but it remains underutilized in music education [4], [6], [8], [9].

Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives has been translated into 22 languages and remains one of the most widely used and frequently referenced frameworks in education, it was originally designed for general, traditional classroom settings and not specifically tailored to address the unique requirements of music students [10]. Music education had long been regarded as too subjective and abstract to be assessed objectively [8]. This challenge is particularly evident in choral conducting, where abstract concepts like emotional expression, collaboration, and leadership must be balanced with measurable technical skills such as conducting gestures and score analysis. The revised Bloom's Taxonomy [11] addresses these challenges by introducing a two-dimensional framework that integrates cognitive processes (verbs) and knowledge types (nouns). About the cognitive processes, as illustrated in Fig. 1, the revised taxonomy (right pyramid) emphasizes active cognitive processes like "analyze" and "create," making it better suited to the dynamic and expressive nature of music education [12].
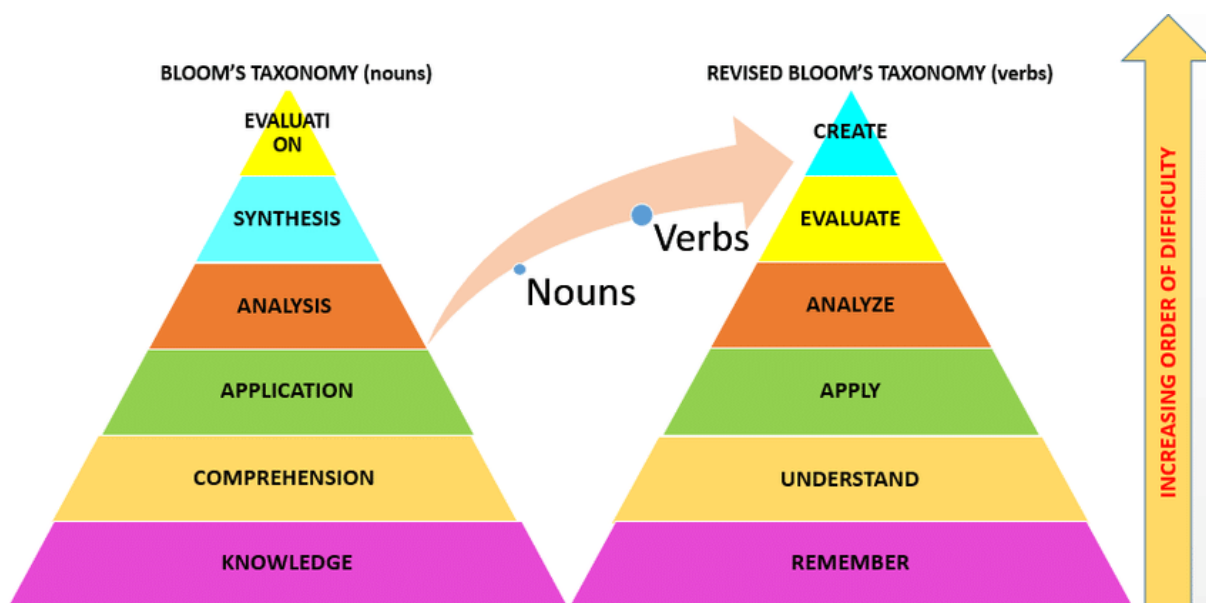

Fig. 1 Comparison between Bloom's taxonomy and revised Bloom's taxonomy [12]

About the knowledge typs, it encompasses four categories:

1) Factual knowledge: The basic elements students must know to be acquainted with a discipline or solve problems in it.
2) Conceptual knowledge: The interrelationships among the basic elements within a larger structure that enable them to function together.
3) Procedura knowledge l: How to do something, methods of inquiry, and criteria for using skills, algorithms, techniques, and methods.
4) Metacognitive knowledge: Knowledge of cognition in general as well as awareness and knowledge of one's own cognition [11].

Each dimension of the taxonomy exists along a continuum, with the cognitive process dimension progressing from simpler tasks like remembering to more complex ones like creating, while the knowledge dimension spans from tangible factual knowledge to more abstract metacognitive understanding [13].

Choral Conducting and the Revised Taxonomy

The revised taxonomy addresses many of the intricate cognitive processes inherent to music education, which are deeply intertwined with affective and psychomotor learning domains [8]. This makes it well-suited to the multifaceted demands of choral conducting. In the context of choral conducting, it requires integration across all three learning domains involves understanding musical scores, focusing on basic conducting techniques, evaluating performances, and providing constructive feedback [3].

The taxonomy's two-dimensional framework integrates cognitive processes (e.g., remembering, understanding, creating) with knowledge types:

1) Factual knowledge: Basic elements such as conducting symbols, beat patterns, and musical terminology.
2) Conceptual knowledge: Relationships among musical elements, such as balancing choral dynamics or understanding phrasing.
3) Procedural knowledge: Techniques and methods, such as conducting gestures, rehearsal strategies, and error detection.
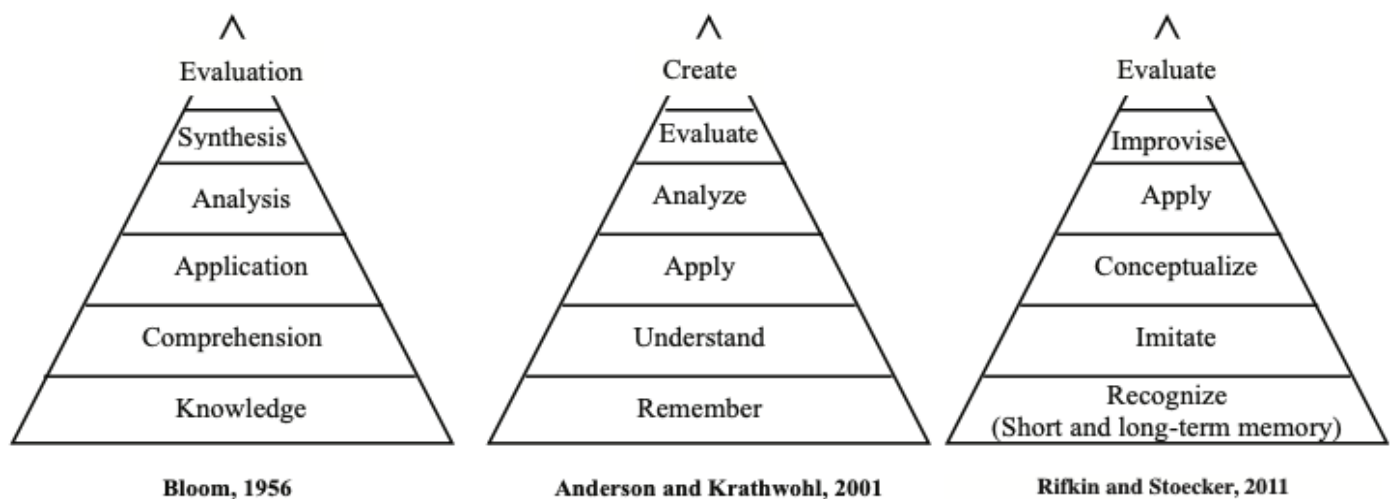4) Metacognitive knowledge: Awareness of one's conducting style, self-assessment, and leadership development.

Fig. 2 Comparison of Learning Taxonomies [10]

For example, a choral conducting lesson might focus on:

1) Remembering (Factual Knowledge): Identifying beat patterns for 3/4, 4/4.
2) Understanding (Conceptual Knowledge): Explaining how gestures impacts ensemble balance.
3) Applying (Procedural Knowledge): Demonstrating gestures that communicate dynamics to the ensemble.
4) Analyzing (Metacognitive Knowledge): Reflecting their conducting patterns by reviewing on how effectively their gestures convey dynamics to the ensemble.

Additionally, the procedural knowledge domain emphasizes the techniques and IJD methods integral to the learning process. Incorporating the procedural knowledge domain into the revised taxonomy provides an indirect representation of the psychomotor skill domain, which plays a vital role in activities such as performing, improvising, composing, arranging, and conducting [8]. The choral conducting content standard will address the learning objectives that involve a high degree of interaction between choral conducting-related motor skills and cognition.

Music Theory in Choral Conducting and the Taxonomy

Rifkin and Stoecker [10] introduce a revised taxonomy or music education, specifically focused on music theory and aural skill development. In their music taxonomy (Fig. 2), they have adapted Anderson and Krathwohl's stages [11] to better reflect how information is processed aurally, starting with recognizing, imitating, and conceptualizing music, and progressing to applying, improvising, and evaluating music in various contexts. This framework emphasiz es the cognitive and auditory processes central to music learning.

Aural and error-detection skills, identified as essential attributes of an effective choral conductor [14], align closely with the stages outlined in this taxonomy [13]. While originally designed for a collegiate context, the taxonomy's principles can be adapted to middle school education, particularly in developing the music theory section of choral conducting content standards. Music theory, including sight-singing, is a critical learning objective at the middle school level, serving as a fundamental artistic expression skill within the Chinese Music Curriculum Standard [3]. By focusing on stages such as recognizing and conceptualizing in choral conducting lessons, educators can help students build foundational skills like sight-singing, and error detection.

Self-Efficacy and Emotional Engagement in Choral Conducting

Despite the revised Bloom's Taxonomy [11] and the taxonomy for music education [10] offer music educators more possible to determine the objective, but overemphasizes the cognitive aspects of music learning. For learning choral conducting also need to develop the affective domain. Self-efficacy, defined by Bandura [15] as the belief in one's ability to succeed, plays a critical role in choral conducting education. Middle school students often engage in musical activities outside of school, such as participating in ensembles or private lessons [16], [17]. However, these external experiences do not always align with school music programs, which can lead to a decline in self-efficacy when students encounter conducting tasks that lack personal relevance or meaning [17]. This emphasizes the need for lessons that connect with students' interests, fostering a sense of ownership and confidence.
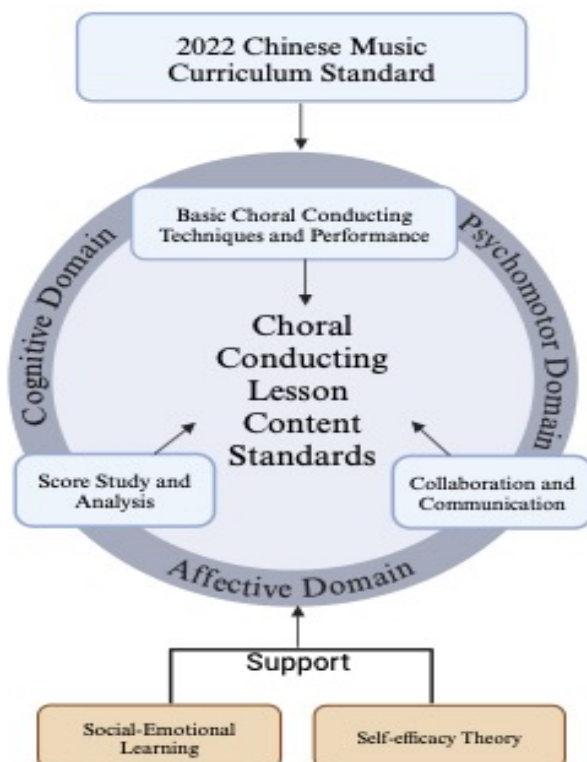

Fig. 3 Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

The highly individualized nature of the affective domain adds another layer of complexity to music education, making it challenging for teachers to assess students' emotional engagement in music learning [18]. However, this complexity does not diminish its importance. Instead, it highlights the need for educators to intentionally

create opportunities for students to explore their personal motivations, ask meaningful questions, and connect deeply with the curriculum [19]. In the context of choral conducting lessons for middle school students, this could involve activities such as allowing students to choose their repertoire, experiment with conducting styles, or reflect on how music relates to their lives and identities. As defined by Krathwohl, Bloom, and Masia [5], the affective domain is critical for learning as it emphasizes attitudes, motivation, participation, and the integration of discipline-specific values into real-life contexts. By addressing these elements, teachers can create a classroom environment where students feel emotionally invested and engaged in the learning process. This not only enhances their connection to the subject matter but also fosters broader skills such as self-expression, collaboration, and leadership, which are essential for success in choral conducting.

Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) in Choral Conducting

Choral conducting provides a unique platform for integrating social-emotional learning (SEL) objectives. Edgar [20, p.14] emphasized the importance of intentionally embedding SEL objectives into lesson plans, arguing that including SEL-related goals alongside music learning objectives allows for the seamless integration of SEL into effective music teaching. For middle school students, whose developmental needs extend beyond technical training, SEL skills such as self-awareness, collaboration, and responsible decision-making are critical [21]. Collaborative activities in choral conducting, such as leading small ensembles or providing peer feedback, foster these competencies while also building technical skills.

Research by Parker [22] highlights the value of teamwork in music education, showing how collaborative environments enhance students' self-efficacy and motivation. Similarly, Mawang [23] emphasizes that collaboration exposes students to diverse perspectives, enriching their engagement and performance. By intentionally incorporating SEL objectives into choral conducting lessons, educators can address both musical and personal growth, ensuring a holistic and meaningful learning experience.

Formulation of Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

This study examines the development of choral conducting content standards for middle school students. The conceptual and theoretical framework (Fig. 3) is essential to establish a foundation that guides the research process and connects the study's objectives with broader theories in music education.

The conceptual framework for this study is rooted in the Chinese Music Curriculum standards [3]. The conceptual framework narrows the focus to the specific skills, knowledge, and competencies required for middle school choral conducting, aligning with the Chinese Music Curriculum Standards. These skills foster critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and cultural understanding, emphasizing both technical proficiency and emotional expression.

The theoretical framework provides the foundation for understanding the broader educational principles, while the conceptual framework narrows the focus to the specific skills and knowledge required for middle school choral conducting. The theoretical framework, grounded in Bloom's Revised Taxonomy [11], integrates the cognitive, affective, and psychomotor domains to address the intellectual, emotional, and physical aspects of choral conducting. Supporting theories, such as Self-Efficacy Theory [15] and Social-Emotional Learning [21], ensure that students build confidence, develop emotional awareness, and cultivate leadership and teamwork skills.

By integrating theoretical insights with conceptual understanding, this framework ensures that the proposed choral conducting content standards effectively foster confidence, leadership skills, and cultural awareness, empowering students to grow in choral conducting lessons.

ACKNOWLEDGE

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