



Music Education in Malawi under Scrutiny

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Abstract

This study examines the impact of inadequate foundational music education on university music students in Malawi. It analyses performance gaps revealed during Work Integrated Learning (WIL) placements and explores systemic factors contributing to these challenges. Guided by Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory, phenomenological qualitative research explored the experiences of internship host institutions that supervised Malawi University of Science and Technology (MUST) music students between 2022 and 2024. Semi-structured telephone interviews were conducted and analysed thematically. The study revealed a significant knowledge gap, including inadequate theoretical grounding, limited instrumental proficiency, and misalignment between academic curricula and industry demands. Despite these, the students demonstrated adaptability and enthusiasm, particularly in flexible settings such as media houses and non-governmental organisations. The study faced a limitation of a smaller number of participants than had been anticipated. The study suggests an immediate curriculum reform to be carried out, which should involve the industries, including the integration of music education at foundational levels, provision of learning materials, and active collaboration between universities and industry stakeholders.

Introduction

Music education is vital for cognitive, cultural and emotional developments (Hallan & Creech, 2022). The multiple intelligences theory suggests that a human being has at least nine intelligences (Gardner, 2020). The alluded intelligences support each other, which entails that when the musical intelligence is underdeveloped, other intelligences will be affected. In Malawi, the absence of the music subject at primary and secondary levels has led to underprepared university entrants, hindering their music literacy, confidence, and ability to meet performance standards during internships. This, in turn, affects their performance at a professional level. This study assesses the performance of music students from Malawi University of Science and Technology (MUST) during their internships (also known as Work Integrated Learning (WIL)). The primary objective was to determine whether the absence of music education in Malawian primary and secondary schools influences the students' performance. The study involved institutions that host internships for these students, utilising semi-structured interviews within a phenomenological research design. The



findings highlight critical areas of concern and propose strategies for improving music education in Malawi.

The silent death of music education in Malawi

Across the board, music education is a crucial component of any school curriculum to create well-rounded learners. The National Association for Music Education (2014) asserts that music education supports cognitive development, emotional expression, and social skills. Despite the great value of the subject, the implementation of music education often faces huge resistance, especially in developing countries such as Malawi.

In Malawi, the music curriculum has evolved, incorporating reforms aimed at ensuring high-quality content, pedagogy, and assessment. Chirwa and Naidoo (2014) argue that "the music curricula have undergone several revisions aimed at enhancing their relevance and effectiveness". However, these reviews were never implemented due to a lack of supporting materials, inadequate and unqualified music teachers, and negative perceptions from key stakeholders (Ligoya, 2010).

In 2013, the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MoEST) introduced Performing Arts (PA), replacing music education. The new subject incorporates music, drama and dance. The syllabus indicates time allocation of three periods (forty minutes per period) per week (MoEST, 2013). To fairly address each component of the subject, each of the elements is allocated 40 minutes per week, which might not be enough to address the needs of the subject adequately. However, even as this is the case, the new subject is yet to be fully implemented in schools.

Theoretical framework

This study is therefore guided by Lev Vygotsky's Social-Cultural Theory of Learning. The alluded theory guides the search for solutions to implementing music education in schools. It is imperative to note that this study is based on the above theory. Miksza and Johnson (2012) note that implications for music education practice that are not grounded in some forms of theory are essentially "blind" (p. 37).

Vygotsky's social-cultural theory of learning

Vygotsky's vision for his theory was to make a positive impact on child development. The theory states that human development and learning are socially mediated processes. In other words, social interactions within a family and community are a means through which children learn their behaviours. According to Vygotsky, learning occurs on two levels: social and individual (Vygotsky, 1978).

The following major themes of the theory are relevant to this study:

The zone of proximal development (ZPD):

This is the space between what the learner can do without assistance and what they can do with assistance from an adult or a more skilled peer. There are three stages of ZPD, and these are: tasks a learner cannot do even with guidance; tasks a learner can do with guidance; and tasks a learner can do alone without any assistance (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86).



The more knowledgeable other (MKO)

Vygotsky believes that learning in a child happens when the child associates with an adult or a peer who is more skilled. In a school setting, an MKO can be a teacher or a peer who knows more or better (1978, p. 83).

Scaffolding

This refers to the strategic support given to a learner until they reach independence. Teachers set up small, achievable tasks for learners to solve through small, challenging, and achievable steps. The teachers may support the learner along the way, decreasing the level of support as the student succeeds. Each step of success builds confidence, and eventually the learner is able to complete the task independently without support (Wood, Burner & Ross, 1976).

This theory has been applied to explore how the socio-cultural context of primary and secondary education in Malawi can influence students' exposure to music and their readiness for tertiary-level music studies. It has also been used to analyse ways through which the experiences of university music students can be improved, having learned that their studies are negatively impacted by the absence of music education in the Malawian primary and secondary schools.

Internship host institutions (2022 to 2024)

As of the period between 2022 and 2024, the following institutions have been instrumental in providing internship opportunities to African Musicology students from MUST:

- Blantyre Arts Festival (BAF)
- Copyright Society of Malawi (Cosoma)
- Jacaranda Cultural Centre
- Kamuzu Academy
- Kamuzu Barracks (Military Band)
- Lusubilo Community Care
- Malawi Broadcasting Cooperation (MBC)
- Malawi Police Band
- Mibawa Television
- Music Crossroads Malawi
- Sanctuary (Ministry of Tourism)
- Sound Addicts
- Times Media Group
- Youth Net and Counselling (Yoneco)

From this list, seven institutions were engaged in the study. Due to ethical considerations, the names of the specific institutions and their representatives will not be disclosed. However, sincere appreciation is extended to them for their contributions.

Interview areas

The interviews covered the following key themes to gain deeper insights into student preparedness, institutional support, and industry expectations:



- Roles and responsibilities assigned to the internees
- Expected skills and competencies
- Overall performance assessment
- Strengths and weaknesses
- Tasks where students excelled and areas where they struggled
- Students' adaptability to industry demands
- Challenges and contributing factors
- Industry readiness and employability
- Feedback to the university

Internship responsibilities varied depending on the nature of each institution. However, they generally included music performance, audio production, audio engineering, videography, teaching assistance, radio presenting, and radio programme editing.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design, specifically adopting a phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of internship host supervisors who interacted with music education students from MUST. The goal was to understand how the lack of formal music education at primary and secondary levels has influenced student performance and preparedness during internships. The research was grounded in a relativist ontology and a constructivist epistemology, which recognise that knowledge is subjective and shaped by individual experiences (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). This philosophical stance aligns with the study's intention to explore how different hosts interpret their encounters with the students, considering both personal and institutional contexts.

A total of seven institutions were purposively sampled based on their previous involvement in hosting MUST music students. The participants were considered information-rich because of their first-hand experience with the phenomenon under investigation. Data were collected through semi-structured telephone interviews, enabling participants to reflect deeply while providing flexibility to probe emerging themes (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

Interview questions focused on themes such as student readiness, practical skill levels, adaptability, task performance, and overall professionalism. To ensure ethical compliance, informed consent was obtained verbally, and the identities of institutions and individuals were anonymised. All interviews were transcribed and subjected to thematic analysis, allowing patterns, meanings, and insights to emerge in relation to the study objectives. Thematic coding followed a systematic review of transcripts, informed by the research questions and supported by relevant literature in music education and community-based learning contexts (Hitzler & Eberle, 2004). Both primary data (interview responses) and secondary data (published research related to music education in Malawi and similar contexts) were used to enrich the analysis and support triangulation.

Limitations

This study faced two main limitations. First, not all targeted institutions responded to participation requests, resulting in a reduction of the planned sample from ten to six. Nevertheless, this aligns with qualitative research standards, where Creswell (2014) worked with between 5 and 25



participants. Second, interviews were conducted via phone, which limited access to nonverbal cues; however, the depth of the responses compensated for this shortfall (Bloom & Crabtree, 2006).

Findings

Interview responses revealed a significant skill gap among students, often necessitating their reassignment to non-musical roles, such as administrative support. Several hosts noted reduced productivity during placements, citing the need to train interns on fundamental skills. However, hosts also acknowledged the students' enthusiasm and willingness to learn. Some settings, such as NGOs and media houses, reported better adaptation than more structured environments like military bands. This suggests context-specific readiness that should inform future curriculum adjustments.

Feedback from internship hosts indicated that most students did not meet industry expectations in terms of skill level at the time they were placed at their respective internships. Some students were relocated to roles that required minimal musical expertise, such as assisting in school libraries. In addition, some organisations reported that their productivity declined during the internships due to the extra effort required in training students who lacked fundamental skills. One participant stated, "The presence of the students was meant to be an additional hand, but instead, it proved to be an extra workload. We spent more time teaching them rather than benefiting from their contributions." Another participant noted, "Many students lacked even the most basic knowledge of chord progressions. We had to teach them from scratch." In terms of performance, military band hosts observed that, "The students were not stage-ready. Even in group rehearsals, they struggled with tempo and synchronisation."

Analysis

The data suggest that, while students lacked strong musical foundations, their openness to feedback and willingness to work hard helped mitigate some performance gaps. This aligns with Vygotsky's concept of scaffolding, where proper guidance enables growth beyond one's current level. Several institutions noted that most students demonstrated a strong willingness to learn. This means that, although their technical skills were lacking, they were motivated and receptive to training.

In view of this, their underperformance may therefore be attributed to issues related to the system rather than individual weaknesses. The students' eagerness to learn indicates that, if provided with a better and stronger foundation, they could achieve higher competency levels.

Regarding students' ability to adapt, those in creative roles, such as broadcasting stations (both radio and television) and non-governmental organisations, were reported to adjust more swiftly than those placed in more musical and highly structured institutions, like academic institutions and military bands. This detail reveals variability in how students are prepared to handle different internship contexts, and this needs to be examined and considered for future curriculum reviews.



Discussion

The findings underscore that there is a gap in Malawi's education system, which is the absence of music education at primary and secondary levels. Students selected into university music programmes face challenges because they lack basic musical or performance experience, resulting in limited abilities in academic engagements and professionalism (Chanunkha, 2005; Wiggins, 2001).

Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory of learning becomes instrumental in interpreting these challenges. The concept of Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) suggests that the progress of students relies on the support from mentors who are more knowledgeable (Vygotsky, 1978). In this case, the absence of music education in the students' foundational years limits their entry into ZPD, thereby creating a challenging situation for university educators and internship supervisors.

The study reveals a misalignment between university curricula and industry expectations, a significant concern among stakeholders. Participants questioned whether current programmes reflect the skills and tools used in the field, particularly in performance, digital music production, and interdisciplinary collaboration. Such gaps indicate the need to involve industry experts during curriculum development and review.

Similar findings have been reported in other African nations. For instance, studies in Kenya by Mwai and Wanyama (2024) demonstrate that popular music education curricula, although promising, are constrained by infrastructural deficits, including a lack of adequate digital tools, poor internet connectivity, and inadequately trained teachers (Mwai & Wanyama, 2024). Interns in those settings also report that, although the theoretical content is strong, they are underprepared when it comes to applying digital production skills or performing in real-world settings. This mirrors what MUST internship hosts observed.

Finally, comparative studies of internships across Southern Africa reveal that where internship programmes include strong mentorship, community engagement, and alignment with the local music industry, students fare better in terms of employable skills, creativity, and confidence (Empirical Analysis-South Africa; Adoption of Music Education as Vocational Pathway-Zambia) (Malapane & Mukonza, 2023; Mwansa, Banda, & Kasebusha, 2022). MUST students likewise have shown resilience and passion, especially in environments where hosts provided hands-on guidance, practical exposure, and immediate feedback.

Contributing factors to performance

All participants agreed that the absence of music education in primary and secondary schools was a significant contributing factor to the observed shortfalls. Many students enter university with no prior formal music training, making it challenging to keep up with coursework and industry expectations. As Wiggins (2001) notes, inconsistency in students' educational backgrounds can lead to varied academic and professional outcomes. The lack of a solid foundation in music when entering university may lead to difficulties in keeping pace with other students who have had a strong musical upbringing, resulting in the failure to develop the necessary foundational skills.

Additionally, some participants questioned whether university programmes aligned with industry demands. One participant suggested, "It would be easier if the universities involved us when



crafting the curriculum so that we can contribute areas that really count in the industry.” This concern highlights the importance of involving industry stakeholders in curriculum reviews, ensuring that graduates are well-equipped to meet the demands of the industry. Another participant added, “We too can teach if they give us a chance to help them at the implementation level, many of these issues won’t be experienced.” If this is implemented, it will ensure that the student is covered in all crucial areas of the programme.

Another contributing factor is limited access to musical instruments, technology and infrastructure. A participant from one of the military bands revealed, “We noted that the students had not practised enough of the basics they had learned before joining us. They need more time for practice and access to the instruments to perfect their craft.” Seyani (2015) agrees that institutions struggle with limited instruments, rehearsal rooms, and other essential equipment for effective practice, which critically affects the outcome of students’ studies.

Cultural perceptions of music education are another factor that contributes to students’ experiences. Ligoya (2010) reveals that people view music education as an unimportant subject compared to other subjects, resulting in less attention and support being given to the subject. Nzewi (2003) asserts that music is often perceived as a recreational rather than academic subject, which undermines support from families and schools. Such perceptions may lead parents to discourage their children from pursuing music careers.

Suggested solutions

As it has already been revealed in this study, one significant contributing factor to the challenges facing university students is the absence of music education in primary and secondary schools. Therefore, this paper calls for the implementation of the subject in the said education levels. Guided by the theoretical framework for this study, there is a need for teachers to be well-trained so that their students have a skilled person to guide them (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 83). The implementation of any curriculum requires teachers. This is a call to all universities and colleges to introduce music teacher training programmes.

Second, the implementation requires the availability of necessary materials, such as textbooks, teachers’ guides, curriculum training manuals, and the syllabus, among others. These materials are as crucial as they provide the necessary direction to both teachers and students. As revealed by Chanunkha (2005), one of the contributing factors to the unsuccessful implementation of music education is the unavailability of necessary resources.

The study also recommends advocacy to help citizens understand and appreciate the value and need for the subject. Ligoya (2010) reveals that negative perception towards music education among parents causes them to discourage their children from taking the subject. Many people view musicians as people given to bad and immoral behaviours, and as such, they would not want their children to take the same path. However, it is critical for people to learn that music is not only crucial for cognitive development (Sarkamo & Koelsch, 2017; Harvard Health Publishing, 2020) but also for personal career and national economic development at large (Creech & Hallam, 2019). Music education is as crucial as any other subject.



Lastly, there is a way to assist the ongoing university music students. As provided in the theoretical framework for this study, students should be guided to maximise the idea of ‘the more knowledgeable other’. There are some stakeholders, such as the Police and the Malawi Defence Force, who send some of their employees to study music at the universities. Under normal circumstances, such individuals tend to excel in areas of music performance and music theory. As such, lecturers need to strategically organise their students so that they can benefit from their classmates who are better in terms of skills.

Conclusion

The study concludes that Malawi’s lack of structured music education before university significantly hinders students’ performance at the tertiary level. Furthermore, a disconnect between academic training and industry needs exacerbates these challenges. It is recommended that music be introduced at primary and secondary levels, curricula be co-designed with industry stakeholders, and internship models be redesigned to include preplacement training. These steps would help ensure students graduate with the competencies needed to thrive professionally.

Table 1: Observed Skill Gaps in MUST students (2022)

Skill Area	Gap Identified
Music theory	Limited grasp of notation, harmony, and musical structure
Instrumental performance	Weak proficiency in both Western and indigenous instruments
Digital production	Little experience with audio software and recording techniques
Cultural context	Lack of familiarity with traditional Malawian forms

Table 2: Strengths of MUST Music Students Observed During Internships

Strength Area	Description
Adaptability	Students showed quick adjustment to new teaching and performing environments despite initial challenges.
Enthusiasm and passion	Students demonstrated strong motivation and willingness to learn from their hosts through active participation in the given tasks.
Teamwork and collaboration	Worked well with their colleagues and supervisors, showing strong interpersonal and cooperative skills.
Resilience and work ethic	Maintained focus, worked under pressure, and demonstrated determination to set tasks.

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