

# Formation of learning goals in music education in Estonian general comprehensive schools 1918–2023

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## Summary

Music education has a unique role, considering the content of education, and serves as the basis for music culture. Its position and meaning as a compulsory subject, both in national and school curricula, is extraordinary compared to curricula of other countries. Music education at all Estonian general comprehensive schools provides children and youth free access to learning music. Although the unmanageable amount of information of the 21st century has considerably complicated the selection and specification of the learning content at all levels of organising education, it is of great significance to analyse the potential new role and developing content of music education in the national curricula for the future. It presupposes philosophical and pedagogical specification of basic principles for music education, which would make meaning for learners, meet the characteristics of the Estonian cultural space and be rational and suitable for implementation in school practice. New learning environments, both at home and in educational institutions, have to be considered. The tradition of teaching music at schools has rapidly and successfully developed since folk schools were established up to the present. Today, music has acquired the meaning of a tool for keeping balance considering people's mental and physical health. Recent research has demonstrated a strong potential for supporting the development of personality, which has brought issues related to organising music education and its content to the foreground in several countries. Numerous research reports have proved the potential of music in the development of people's cognitive skills and emotional capacities; in addition, the increasing role of music in the development of social skills and general cultural outlook has been highlighted.

This article aims to specify how setting goals for school music education, considering opportunities and widening the meaning of music for the younger generation in constantly changing conditions has developed. Accordingly, the

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research problem is related to the future role of music education at Estonian schools as a compulsory school subject in national curricula, as it has been so far. The analysis of the formation of goals for learning music at different times enables us to understand the history of school music education in Estonia. The following research questions have been asked:

- 1) What kind of general aims have been set for organising music education at schools?
- 2) What values have been recognised in culture and identity building?
- 3) How have the aims for organising music education at schools changed over time?

**Research methods.** Analyses of educational policy documents (curricula of 1918–2023) and semi-structured interviews (n = 5) have been used as methods for data collection. The analysis of curriculum documents has been divided into three periods: 1) Curricula during the Republic of Estonia (1918–1940), 2) School programs of the Soviet period (1940–1991), 3) Curricula and music syllabi in Estonia after regained independence (1991–2023). Semi-structured interviews have been used to increase the reliability of the research concerning the Soviet and the Estonian regained independence periods. They were carried out by specialists, qualified in music education, who had worked in different roles in the field of music education during the last two periods mentioned: as practising school teachers, curriculum developers, authors of school textbooks and researchers.

**Discussion and results.** The analysis has shown that the goals and aims of music education have changed due to various political, social and cultural conditions and influencing factors. Music education at schools has been the basis for the Estonian choir music tradition and its sustainability as a cultural phenomenon. Special lessons for choir singing have always been an additional part of school music education, in which knowledge and skills constituting musical literacy acquired in subject lessons could be used. The concept of music literacy as a goal for school studies has been constantly developing and widening in meaning. It does not mean only notation skills as in earlier times; it also includes singing, listening to music, playing instruments, moving with music, individually composing music, and awareness of basic developments in the history of music. This research also confirms the wide potential of music education at schools for personality development at large as it makes integrated and complex use of cognitive, affective and psycho-motoric fields. Earlier research of Benjamin Bloom (cognitive and knowledge development based), David R. Krathwohl

(affective, or value development based) and Anita J. Harrow (psycho-motoric movement and coordination development based) taxonomies has created a system to be considered for goal setting for curriculum development. Empirical research data were confirmed by specialists' opinions collected by semi-structured interviews, stressing the meaning of developing both individual and collective national identities in their hierarchies. Music education as a holistic, smartly sequenced system has proved successful and culturally meaningful in all the periods researched. Moreover, the support offered by the state institutions and governments of different times has helped to preserve music education as a compulsory school subject in national curricula, syllabi/subject programs.

**Conclusion.** Estonia continues to maintain a strong music culture as part of the education system. The traditions of choirs and a nationwide appetite for singing and dancing are well supported by all members of society. It is most significant that our tradition of Song and Dance Celebrations belongs to the UNESCO World Cultural Heritage list. It would be culturally meaningful and socio-politically relevant to widen the goals of school music education for future national curriculum design, considering the dynamics and historical experience so far.

*Keywords:* goals of music education, curricula, syllabi, personality and identity development