

EXPLORING THE INFLUENCE OF MATERIAL CULTURE ON MUSIC PEDAGOGY IN RURAL CHINESE PRIMARY SCHOOLS

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Abstract

Keyword:

Material Culture;
Music Pedagogy;
Rural Education;
Sociomateriality;
Qualitative Case
Study



This study explores how music pedagogy in rural primary schools in China emerges through the interaction of material culture dimensions, including tools and technologies, knowledge resources, and social interactions. Although existing research has mainly focused on structural inequalities and resource constraints in rural education, relatively little attention has been given to how teachers actively construct and adapt pedagogical practices in such contexts. A qualitative multi-case study design was adopted across three rural primary schools in China. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis involving six music teachers. Patterns across cases were identified and interpreted through thematic analysis. The findings show that rural music pedagogy is characterized by adaptive and context-responsive practices rather than being determined solely by material constraints. Teachers flexibly reorganize available musical instruments and digital tools, draw on curriculum knowledge and professional experience, and integrate local cultural resources into classroom practice. Moreover, social interactions among teachers, students, school leaders, and community members play a vital role in maintaining and supporting teaching continuity. This study concludes that rural music pedagogy should be understood as a sociomaterial practice emerging from the dynamic interaction among material conditions, knowledge systems, and social relations. By reframing rural pedagogy as an adaptive and relational process rather than a condition of deprivation, this study contributes to a more practice-oriented understanding of teaching in resource-constrained educational contexts.



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Introduction

In China's rural primary schools, music education has become an important component of basic education reform, particularly under national policies that emphasise educational equity and cultural development. However, despite continued policy support, rural schools still face persistent challenges, including limited access to musical instruments, constrained teaching resources, and unequal opportunities for teacher professional development.

Most existing research has interpreted these challenges primarily through the lens of structural inequality and resource scarcity. While such studies provide valuable insights into broader systemic conditions, they tend to present rural schools in a deficit-oriented manner and offer limited attention to how teachers actively respond to and adapt within these constraints in their everyday teaching practice.

Recent research on material culture and sociomaterial theory offers an alternative way of understanding classroom practice. These perspectives suggest that teaching is not solely determined by available resources but is produced through the interaction of material conditions, knowledge systems, and social relations. From this perspective, classroom practice emerges from teachers' situated decisions and their ongoing engagement with specific educational contexts.

In rural music classrooms, tools and technologies, knowledge resources, and social interactions are closely interwoven in everyday practice. Teachers often work with limited resources to adjust instructional activities, share musical instruments, utilise basic digital tools where available, and incorporate local cultural materials to support student learning. Against this background, this study explores how music teachers in three rural primary schools in China construct and sustain music pedagogy through the interaction of material culture dimensions.

Research Objectives

This study is guided by three research objectives:

RO1: To explore how rural primary school teachers in China negotiate the use of tools and technologies in shaping music pedagogy.

RO2: To interpret how teachers draw upon knowledge resources to inform their music pedagogical practices.

RO3: To examine how social interactions influence teachers' pedagogical decision-making in rural music classrooms.

Research Questions

RQ1: How are tools and technologies used and negotiated by rural primary school teachers in shaping music pedagogy?

RQ2: How do teachers utilise knowledge resources to inform and shape instructional practices?

RQ3: How do social interactions influence pedagogical decision-making in rural music classrooms?

Significance of Study

This study makes several contributions to rural music education research.

Theoretically, drawing on material culture and sociomaterial perspectives, this study conceptualises music pedagogy as an emergent practice produced through the interaction of tools and technologies, knowledge resources, and social interactions. This perspective moves beyond deficit-oriented interpretations of rural education that focus primarily on resource scarcity, and instead emphasises how pedagogical practice is continuously constructed within specific sociomaterial contexts. In doing so, it offers a more relational understanding of how music teaching is enacted in rural schools.

Methodologically, this study adopts a qualitative multi-case study design, using semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis. This approach enables a context-sensitive and in-depth examination of how music pedagogy is enacted in rural school settings, and supports systematic cross-case comparison of teaching practices across different institutional environments.

Practically, the findings provide insights into how rural music teachers adapt their instructional strategies in response to available resources, and how local cultural knowledge is incorporated into everyday classroom practice. These insights may inform efforts to strengthen the responsiveness and contextual relevance of music education in rural schools.

Literature Review

From the perspective of material culture and sociomaterial theory, classroom practice is understood as emerging from the continuous interaction among tools and technologies, knowledge resources, and social interactions rather than existing as a set of isolated instructional elements. Within this perspective, teaching is not simply shaped by external conditions but is produced through the entanglement of material and social elements in situated practice (Fenwick et al., 2011; Martínez & Villanueva, 2018). Sociomaterial theory further emphasises that these elements are not separable in practice but are mutually constitutive, suggesting that pedagogy is continuously enacted through the dynamic interplay of human and non-human actors within specific contexts.

Research on rural music education has consistently highlighted limitations in tools and technologies, including shortages of musical instruments, limited multimedia facilities, and unequal access to teaching resources. These constraints are often associated with restricted pedagogical possibilities in classroom practice (Clark, 2022; Sun & Leung, 2014; Tian & Qiu, 2021). However, rather than being interpreted solely as limiting factors, such constraints have also been shown to generate adaptive and context-responsive pedagogical practices. Teachers frequently adjust instructional materials, organise shared use of instruments, and incorporate alternative forms of musical expression when digital or instrumental resources are limited (Bates, 2011; Hao, 2024). This suggests that material constraints function not only as external limitations but also as conditions that shape pedagogical improvisation and creative adaptation in practice.

Knowledge resources, including curriculum guides, teachers' professional experience, and informal learning materials, also play a central role in instructional decision-making. In contexts where formal professional development opportunities are limited, teachers rely heavily on experiential knowledge that is continuously reinterpreted and adjusted in relation to classroom realities. Priestley et al. (2015) conceptualise such processes as teacher agency emerging from the dynamic interaction between individual capacity and contextual conditions. In addition, locally embedded cultural knowledge has

been increasingly recognised as a significant pedagogical resource, enabling more meaningful connections between curriculum content and students' lived experiences. This indicates that knowledge in rural music education is not static, but is continuously reconstructed through situated practice.

Social interactions among teachers, students, school leaders, and community members represent another essential dimension of rural music pedagogy. These interactions provide both formal and informal forms of support that help sustain teaching practices in resource-constrained environments (Bates, 2011; Roulston & Legette, 2020). Collaboration among teachers facilitates the sharing of strategies and resources, while community participation extends music learning beyond the classroom. Rather than functioning solely as supportive mechanisms, social interactions can also be understood as constitutive elements of pedagogical practice, shaping how teaching is organised, negotiated, and sustained in everyday school contexts.

The existing literature has primarily focused on structural inequalities and resource limitations in rural education. While this perspective is valuable in highlighting systemic challenges, it often overlooks how teachers actively construct and adapt pedagogical practices within such constraints. Consequently, the dynamic relationship between material conditions, knowledge systems, and social relations remains underexplored (Azano & Stewart, 2016; Benedict & Schmidt, 2020). Addressing this gap, this study conceptualises rural music pedagogy through a sociomaterial lens, in which tools and technologies, knowledge resources, and social interactions are understood as mutually constitutive elements that co-produce classroom practice.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative multi-case study design to explore how rural music pedagogy is constructed through the interaction of material culture dimensions, namely tools and technologies, knowledge resources, and social interactions. A multi-case study design is appropriate for examining complex, context-dependent educational practices within real school environments, as it enables both in-depth within-case analysis and systematic cross-case comparison. The design is informed by Yin's (2018) case study methodology and its replication logic, in which each school is treated as a distinct case and the unit of analysis. The design incorporates both literal replication, where similar patterns are expected across cases, and theoretical replication, where contrasting patterns are anticipated due to differing sociomaterial conditions. This approach strengthens analytical robustness by enabling systematic comparison across cases and supporting theoretical explanation of how sociomaterial conditions shape rural music pedagogy.

The study employed purposive sampling with a maximum variation strategy to select three rural primary schools in China. The selection was guided by deliberate variation across three analytically meaningful dimensions: the availability of musical instruments and digital teaching technologies, differences in teachers' professional backgrounds in music education, and the extent of school-community engagement in supporting music teaching. These dimensions were treated as key sociomaterial variables rather than purely descriptive characteristics, as they directly shape how music pedagogy is enacted in rural school contexts. Within each school, two music teachers were selected based on their active involvement in music instruction, resulting in a total of six participants. This sample size is appropriate for qualitative case study research as it enables in-depth exploration of lived pedagogical experiences while maintaining sufficient variation for cross-case analytical comparison. Sampling continued until thematic saturation was reached, indicated by the absence of new emergent themes across the dataset.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis. Each participant took part in one semi-structured interview lasting approximately 45 to 60 minutes, which was sufficient to capture stable narratives of their pedagogical experiences, instructional decision-making, and adaptation to resource conditions. Classroom observations were conducted over a two-week period in each school, with three music lessons observed per school, resulting in a total of nine observed lessons. These observations focused on instructional practices, the use of musical instruments and digital technologies, and interaction patterns between teachers and students during classroom activities.

In addition, relevant documents, including curriculum guidelines, lesson plans, and teaching materials, were collected from each school. These documents complemented interview and observation data by providing contextual evidence of instructional planning and classroom implementation. The integration of multiple data sources enabled triangulation and enhanced the interpretive depth of the analysis.

Data analysis followed the principles of thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). All interview transcripts, observation notes, and documentary materials were systematically coded. Themes were developed through iterative comparison across the full dataset. NVivo software was used to support data organisation and coding consistency, enabling structured cross-case analysis and refinement of themes related to tools and technologies, knowledge resources, and social interactions.

Trustworthiness was ensured through multiple strategies. Triangulation across interviews, observations, and documents enhanced the consistency of findings, while member checking with selected participants helped confirm the accuracy of interpretations. Thick description was employed to provide detailed contextual accounts of classroom practices, supporting transferability to similar rural educational settings. Reflexive notes were maintained throughout the research process to ensure transparency in analytical decision-making and interpretation.

Ethical considerations were addressed through informed consent procedures, confidentiality protection, and secure data storage. All participants were informed of the purpose of the study and their right to withdraw at any stage without consequence.

Findings

Analysis has identified three interconnected themes that explain how rural music pedagogy is shaped through the interaction of material culture dimensions, namely tools and technologies, knowledge resources, and social interactions.

Theme 1: Transformational Use of Tools and Technologies in Music Pedagogy

The findings show that rural music teachers face considerable limitations in the availability of musical instruments, classroom facilities, and multimedia technologies. However, rather than directly constraining teaching practice, these limitations often give rise to flexible and adaptive pedagogical strategies.

Teachers frequently share limited instruments among students, adapt teaching materials according to available resources, and incorporate basic digital tools where possible. Classroom observations indicate that improvisation and flexible resource use are central to sustaining student engagement in music learning activities.

One teacher explained:

“We often have to adjust lessons depending on what instruments are available on that day. Sometimes students share instruments, and sometimes we use body percussion instead.” (Teacher Interview)

Across interviews and observations, it is evident that instructional decisions are strongly shaped by the availability of material resources. Rather than following fixed lesson plans, teachers continuously adjust their teaching in response to classroom conditions. When instruments are limited, students often engage in instrument sharing or body percussion activities, ensuring continuity of learning through adaptive strategies. This reflects a context-responsive pedagogical approach in which teaching is dynamically adjusted to sustain student participation.

Overall, the findings indicate that music pedagogy in rural classrooms is characterised by ongoing adaptation to material conditions rather than adherence to fixed instructional structures. This adaptive process provides the foundation for examining how knowledge resources further support pedagogical decision-making.

Theme 2: Knowledge Resources as Pedagogical Guidance

The findings indicate that curriculum documents, teachers’ professional experience, and informal learning resources play a significant role in shaping instructional decisions. In rural contexts where formal training opportunities are limited, experiential knowledge becomes a primary resource for guiding classroom practice.

In addition, local cultural knowledge is frequently integrated into teaching. Teachers draw on folk songs and community musical traditions to make learning more relevant and accessible to students’ lived experiences.

A teacher noted:

“Local songs help students connect better with music. They are more familiar with them, so participation is much higher.” (Teacher Interview)

Overall, knowledge resources—particularly curriculum materials and local cultural knowledge—play a central role in shaping instructional decisions and enhancing student engagement in rural music classrooms. These practices highlight the importance of context-sensitive knowledge application in resource-constrained environments. Building on this, the following section examines the role of social interactions in sustaining pedagogical practice.

Theme 3: Social Interactions as Supportive Pedagogical Structures

The findings show that social interactions among teachers, students, school leaders, and community members play an essential role in sustaining music teaching practices in rural primary schools. These interactions provide both formal and informal forms of support that help teachers manage resource limitations and maintain continuity in classroom practice.

Teacher–student interaction is identified as central to maintaining engagement in music learning, supporting participation and enabling more flexible teaching approaches in resource-constrained contexts.

Collaboration among teachers also serves as an important source of pedagogical support. Teachers report that sharing strategies, experiences, and resources informally helps them refine their instructional practices and improve teaching effectiveness.

School leadership is further identified as a key enabling factor. Administrative support, including encouragement for pedagogical experimentation and flexibility in curriculum implementation, contributes to a more supportive teaching environment.

Community participation extends music learning beyond the classroom. Local cultural practitioners and community members contribute to sustaining musical traditions and enriching classroom content through local cultural materials and practices.

A teacher explained:

“The support from students, colleagues, and even the community makes it easier to continue teaching music even when resources are limited.” (Teacher Interview)

Overall, the findings demonstrate that social interactions function as a key supportive structure in rural music pedagogy. Rather than operating independently, these interactions are deeply intertwined with material and knowledge conditions, jointly shaping how music teaching is enacted in practice.

Discussion

This study investigated how rural music pedagogy is shaped through the interaction of tools and technologies, knowledge resources, and social interactions. The findings indicate that music teaching in rural primary schools is not merely a response to material constraints but an emergent, contextually situated practice produced through continuous adaptation and relational negotiation within everyday school environments.

Regarding tools and technologies, the findings show that rural music teachers actively adapt limited material resources through improvisation, flexible classroom arrangements, and alternative bodily or group-based musical activities. While this aligns with Bates (2011), who emphasizes adaptive responses to resource scarcity in rural music education, the present study extends this argument by demonstrating that such adaptation is not purely reactive. Instead, it is embedded within ongoing pedagogical decision-making processes that operate in real time to sustain student engagement. In contrast to Clark’s (2022) emphasis on material constraints as limiting conditions, the findings suggest that scarcity may also function as a generative pedagogical condition, enabling creativity, improvisation, and situated instructional flexibility. This thereby repositions tools and technologies not as limiting structures but as pedagogical affordances that emerge through use within specific classroom contexts.

In relation to knowledge resources, the study found that teachers rely on curriculum documents, accumulated teaching experience, and locally embedded cultural knowledge when designing and implementing music lessons. This supports Priestley et al. (2015), who conceptualize teacher agency as an ecological phenomenon emerging from the interaction between individual capacity and contextual conditions. However, the present findings extend this framework by showing that teacher agency in rural music pedagogy is not only ecologically distributed but also materially mediated through engagement with local cultural artefacts and situated resources. In this sense, knowledge in rural music education is not solely individually constructed but is socially and materially embedded, operating as an active mediator in curriculum interpretation and pedagogical adaptation. This extends existing accounts by repositioning knowledge resources as dynamic, contextually produced elements of practice rather than

static inputs into teaching.

The role of social interactions further highlights the relational constitution of rural music pedagogy. The findings demonstrate that collaboration among teachers, support from school leadership, and participation from community members collectively sustain music teaching practices in resource-constrained environments. While this is consistent with Roulston and Legette (2020), who emphasize the importance of interpersonal relations in music education, the present study extends this perspective by challenging the assumption that social interactions function primarily as external or supplementary support structures. Instead, social interactions are shown to be constitutive of pedagogical practice itself, enabling the circulation of material resources, pedagogical knowledge, and local cultural practices across institutional and community boundaries. In this sense, pedagogy is not merely supported by social relations but is actively produced through them.

Overall, the findings reconceptualise rural music pedagogy as a sociomaterial assemblage in which tools and technologies, knowledge resources, and social interactions are mutually constitutive rather than independent determinants of practice. This challenges deficit-oriented perspectives that frame rural education primarily through material scarcity, and instead positions it as an emergent, adaptive, and relational process shaped through situated practice. In doing so, the study advances a sociomaterial understanding of pedagogy that foregrounds the co-constitution of human and non-human elements in rural music education.

Conclusion

This study examined how rural music pedagogy in Chinese primary schools is shaped through the interaction of tools and technologies, knowledge resources, and social interactions. The findings demonstrate that pedagogical practice is not simply determined by material scarcity, but emerges as an adaptive and contextually situated process through the continuous negotiation of available resources, teacher agency, and classroom interaction.

Theoretically, the study advances sociomaterial understandings of education by conceptualising rural music pedagogy as a relational assemblage in which material conditions, knowledge systems, and social relations are mutually constitutive. This shifts analytical attention away from deficit-oriented interpretations of rural education towards an understanding of teaching as an emergent practice produced through the dynamic entanglement of human and non-human elements in situated contexts.

Practically, the findings suggest that strengthening rural music education requires a broader focus beyond material resource provision. In addition to improving infrastructural conditions, attention should be given to enhancing teacher professional agency, supporting context-sensitive curriculum interpretation, and fostering sustained collaboration between schools and local communities. These interconnected dimensions are essential for sustaining meaningful and responsive music pedagogy in resource-constrained environments.

This study is limited by its focus on three rural primary schools and a relatively small participant sample, which may constrain the transferability of findings. Future research could expand the analytical scope through comparative regional studies or longitudinal designs to further examine how rural music pedagogy evolves across different policy and institutional contexts.

Limitations of the Study

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the

research was conducted in three rural primary schools in China, which may limit the transferability of the findings to other educational contexts with different sociocultural and institutional conditions. While the multi-case design enables analytical comparison, the scope remains context-specific.

Second, the study relies on qualitative data collected through interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis. Although this approach provides rich and in-depth insights into participants' experiences and practices, the findings are inevitably shaped by participants' subjective perspectives and the researcher's interpretive lens. As a result, certain aspects of classroom practice may not be fully captured.

Third, the fieldwork was conducted within a limited time frame, which means that only selected teaching episodes and school–community interactions were observed. Consequently, longer-term pedagogical developments and seasonal or policy-related variations in practice may not be fully represented.

Finally, the study primarily focuses on teachers' perspectives, due to limited access to a broader range of stakeholders such as students, parents, and community members in extracurricular contexts. As a result, music learning activities occurring outside formal classroom settings are only partially represented in the analysis.

Recommendations for Future Research

Based on this research, future research can proceed in several directions. For example, comparative studies under different regional contexts may further explore the differences in rural music teaching under various social and material conditions. Longitudinal research can be used to observe over time teachers' teaching practices and the learning environment.

Additionally, mixed-methods research can further explore the relationship between teaching practices and student learning outcomes in rural music education. The future work may also need to consider how the policy framework and institutional support affect the integration of material culture into music teaching.

Co-Author Contribution

The author was responsible for all stages of the research, including data collection, literature review, data analysis, and manuscript preparation.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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Data Availability Statement: All relevant data are within the manuscript and its [Supporting Information](#) files.