

Rural Music Education in China: Perceptions of Music Educators in Henan Province

By

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Abstract

This study investigated the perception and experiences of rural music educators in Henan Province, China. Through the lenses of rural music teachers, the study focused on the values of general music education and revealed students' music learning experiences in rural schools. The main research question was: What are the participants' experiences of teaching general music education in rural schools in Ren County (a pseudonym), Henan Province? There were two guiding questions: a) What is the value and role of music education in rural schools and communities? b) How do participants describe students and their music learning experiences?

To this end, I surveyed and interviewed three rural music teachers and one music director in Ren County. A qualitative design was used to gather the teachers' insights regarding their own experiences and those of their students, and their music programs. Data collection included one survey and two 90-minute interviews with each teacher. Interviews were transcribed, translated from Mandarin to English, coded by category, and analyzed for themes. Findings suggested that with the current emphasis on aesthetic education, rural music education is increasingly important both in national policy and at the county level, but it continues to be in a vulnerable position within the school community due to the unchanged test-oriented education system in China. All participants believe that music education has rich benefits for rural students, and especially for rural "left-behind" children. This research reflected the deeply rooted challenges in rural music education in Ren County while also presented positive trends for future development.

Keywords: Chinese music education, rural music education, general music education, elementary education, students' experiences, "left-behind" children

Chapter 1

Introduction

In China, the term “rural” typically refers to agricultural areas with underdeveloped economies and comparatively scattered populations. As of 2020, the rural population in China has surpassed 576 million, constituting approximately 41.48% of the nation’s total population. Notably, the enrollment of rural students in compulsory primary education stands at an impressive 65 million, representing over 60% of all primary students in the country (China's Ministry of Education, 2021). As such, rural education comprises a vitally important part of Chinese primary education.

In recent years, the Chinese government has launched a series of policies to conduct education reform, aiming to reduce the heavy academic pressure on students and advocate “quality (*suzhi* 素质) education”¹ and aesthetic education to facilitate their holistic development. In June 2019, the Chinese Education Bureau launched the "Action Plan for Sports and Arts Education Immersion," proposing a long-term mechanism for collaboration among the government, universities, and primary and secondary schools to support arts education in underdeveloped areas (Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China, 2019). Many universities have supported music education in rural schools with the help of national financial support, such as college student volunteer teaching and free training for rural music teachers (Guo & Yang, 2022). In 2020, the State Council issued the “Opinions on Comprehensive Strengthening and Innovating School Aesthetic Education in the New Era," proposing “integrating aesthetics into the Middle School Entrance Examination” (Ministry of Education of

¹ *Suzhi* 素质 and *suzhi* education 素质教育 are core terms in Chinese education. It is difficult to find equivalent terms in English. Pang et al. (2020) write that if a person has *suzhi* it means “they have certain values, cultural cultivation, physical and psychological quality, wisdom, and abilities” (p. 381).

the People's Republic of China, 2020). This proposal, closely related to students' interests, has drawn widespread attention from society, making school arts education a hot topic (Guo & Yang, 2022). In July 2021, the "Opinions on Further Reducing the Homework and Extracurricular Training Burden on Students in Compulsory Education Stage," (Double Reduction) was issued, and it has become a primary education policy concern in Chinese society (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2021). The objective of this policy is to reduce the homework burden on students in mandatory education, minimize the number of academic classes taken outside of school, and provide accommodations for students with various backgrounds. Guo and Nie (2022) believe that with the decrease in academic workload and the emphasis on aesthetic education, music education, as the most important content and approach of school aesthetic education, will have more opportunities. Furthermore, with the advocacy of rural education revitalization, rural music education was emphasized to a greater extent than ever before.

However, the disparity in educational resources between rural and urban areas has been reinforced because the various resources that "quality education" requires (like after-school classes, music clubs, and sufficient teachers) are difficult for rural schools to access. In rural settings, 96% of schools have not reached the standards of music teaching equipment set by the state (Zhu, 2007). Despite recent Chinese policy advocating for aesthetic education and the holistic development of students, the low priority of music programs in the educational system is difficult to quickly reverse, especially in rural areas. The scarcity of resources and limited conceptual understanding of aesthetic education hinder progress within rural schools.

The issue of neglecting rural music education is not confined to China alone; it is a widespread global problem. In the United States, Burrack (2009) states that rural schools encounter challenges, such as insufficient resources, geographical isolation, low student

enrollment, and a growing music specialist shortage. After conducting a survey with 119 distant rural schools and 56 remote rural schools, Anderson (2017) revealed that rural music teachers have limited access to music-specific professional development opportunities and face budget constraints when it comes to updating outdated music materials and books. Consequently, depicting a whole picture of rural music education in China can offer valuable insights and practical implications for educators, administrators, and scholars worldwide.

This study was conducted in the rural areas of Ren County (pseudonym), Pingdingshan City, Henan Province. Henan is a developing agricultural province in central China with a population of approximately 98.8 million. As agriculture is the pillar of its economy, 45.04 million people in its rural areas engage in farming (Henan Provincial Bureau of Statistics, 2022). Ren County is located in southwestern Henan Province and has a population of 756,700, of which about 64.84% is rural ([Ren] County Bureau of Statistics, 2021). In China, a county contains urban, sub-districts and rural townships and villages. Ren County has three sub-districts, 15 rural townships, 553 administrative villages, and a landmass of 1,387 square kilometers ([Ren] County People's Government, 2017). More than 70,000 students are currently studying in elementary schools in Ren County (Pang, 2021). Ren County is one of the less-developed areas in Henan, with a below-average GDP. This study delineates rural music programs from the perspective of music teachers and directors in Ren County, Henan Province. It will explore the crucial factors that affect the quality of rural music education and reveal music educators' perceptions of their students' learning experiences to inform administrators and the public about Chinese rural music education programs.

Need for Study

In recent years, there has been a growing recognition of the value of aesthetic education in Chinese society, with the government taking proactive measures to promote music and other art disciplines. In 2013, the Chinese government proposed to "improve the teaching of aesthetic education to enhance students' aesthetic and humanistic qualities" (The State Council Information Office, 2013). Subsequently, the government increased its attention to aesthetic education, urging schools to implement an assessment system specifically tailored to school arts education, thereby ensuring the quality of such programs. However, there is a scarcity of research that specifically delve into rural music education, particularly in terms of exploring the perceptions of rural music educators using a qualitative approach.

Furthermore, for a long time, the intensifying academic competition in China has placed a significant psychological strain on students, particularly among the rural "left-behind" children. These children, who are unable to regularly meet with their parents due to their migration and relocation to urban areas for work opportunities, face an elevated risk to their mental well-being if they do not have adequate outlets to release stress. Many studies have demonstrated the potential benefit of music in facilitating students' emotional expression and self-gratification (Gao, 2017; Lian, 2007) and cultivating students' creativity (Byrne, Carlton & MacDonald, 2003). Consequently, rural music education has assumed critical importance in nurturing the holistic growth of rural students.

Having served as a former teacher in an urban school and actively participating in a rural volunteer teaching group, I have had the opportunity to gain insights into the diverse educational settings and the glaring disparities that exist between rural and urban schools. Each summer, I have been consistently impressed by my rural students' enthusiasm for music class and the

transformative impact it has had on their confidence and personal growth. This firsthand experience has instilled in me a belief in the necessity of a high-quality music program for every student. As such, I am motivated to advocate for my rural students and actively work towards promoting their access to qualified music education. Additionally, during my time in rural schools, I heard from experienced rural teachers who expressed the belief that music serves as an indispensable part of a quality (*suzhi*) education and contributes to students' mental health and overall growth, particularly in the face of a stressful academic environment and limited parental care.

The positive policies and trends and my personal experiences have reinforced my belief that now is an opportune moment to bring forth this crucial yet often overlooked topic. I am committed to delving deeper into the realm of rural music programs and gaining a deeper understanding of the experiences of rural music teachers. By identifying these experiences, we can offer insights and perspectives to music educators, school administrators, and researchers who seek to promote music education programs in rural areas.

Guiding Questions

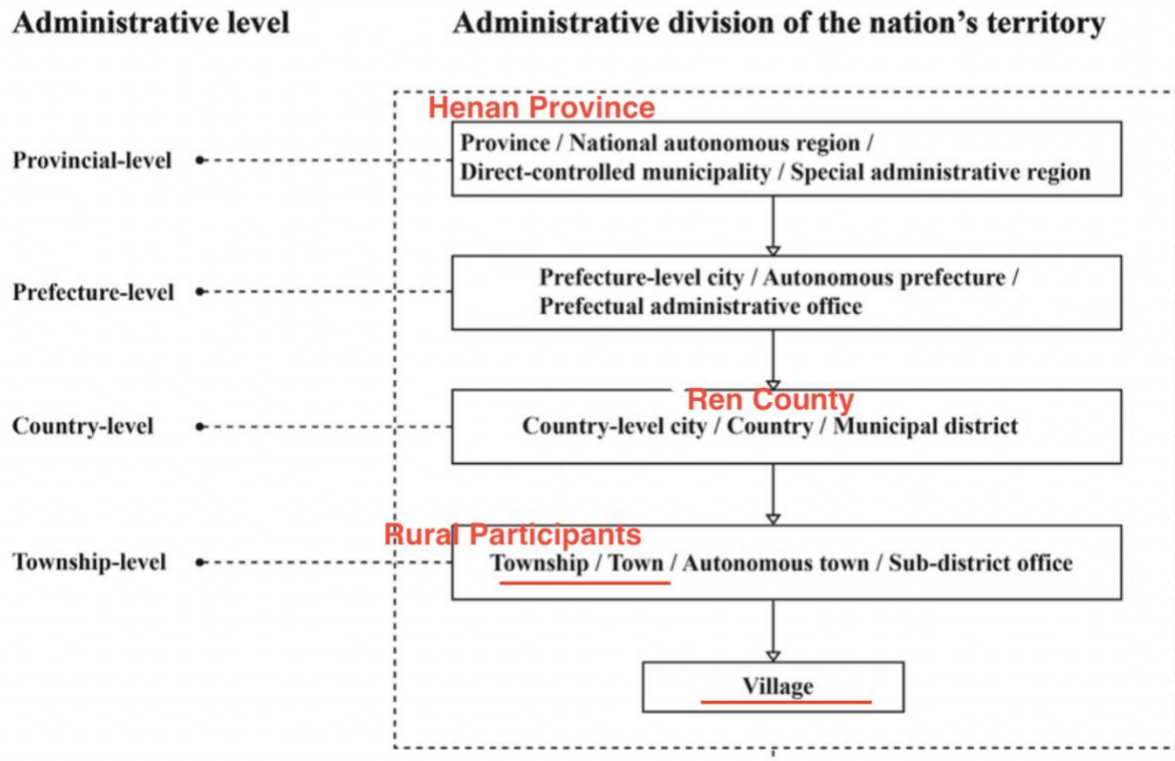
The purpose of this study was to investigate the perception and experiences of rural music educators in Henan Province, China. The study focused on the values of general music education and revealed students' music learning experiences through the lenses of rural music educators. The main research question was: What are the participants' experiences of teaching general music education in rural schools in Ren County (a pseudonym), Henan Province? There were two guiding questions: a) What is the value and role of music education in rural schools and communities? b) How do participants describe students and their music learning experiences?

Definitions

Chinese city: In China, the city consists of urban, suburban, and rural areas. The Administrative Division of China are shown in Figure 1 (marked with locations used in this research).

Figure 1

The Administrative Division of China



Note. The original chart of the administrative division of China was created by H. Sun (2016), *Frontiers of Architectural Research*, 5(3), 301-318. (<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2095263516300085>).

Chinese city system: “On the basis of the Chinese administrative system, there are mainly five levels of cities classified in this way, including four municipalities directly led by the nation, 15 sub-provincial cities, 17 other provincial cities, 250 prefecture-level cities, and 367 county-level cities. This system generally reflects the hierarchy of these cities in terms of city size and population (Long, 2016, p. 38).”.

Rural areas: Rural areas comprise townships and villages. Corresponding to the “city,” rural refers to the agricultural areas, including market towns, villages, mainly agricultural industry (natural economy and primary industry), including all kinds of farms (animal husbandry and aquaculture farms), forest farms, horticulture, and vegetable production. The population in rural areas is scattered. The economy in the rural area is underdeveloped because of its long history of low levels of productivity and low mobility.

Rural experimental schools (hereafter EXP): A school with the task of exploring and testing a certain educational theory or conducting experiments on educational reform. It is the school with the best educational resources in the township. In Ren County, every town has an experimental school and most of them are boarding schools.

Rural remote schools (hereafter RMT): These schools, commonly referred to as "teaching sites" 教学点 in China, are nonconventional rural primary schools with a limited number of students. They are commonly found in mountainous areas and economically underdeveloped regions with sparse populations and inconvenient transportation (Han, 2016).

Special post teachers (hereafter SPT): An SPT can be anyone recruited through an alternative program to teach at high-poverty rural schools. SPT do not need to possess the systematic training of a traditional teacher education program—anyone who has passed the teacher certification tests is eligible to apply. In 2018, SPT became the main resource for novice teachers in impoverished rural schools (Wei, Zhou & Liu, 2020). SPT stand a three-year contract to teach in assigned schools.

“Left-behind” children: The United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) defines “left-behind” children as “children raised in their home countries or in their countries of habitual residence, who have been left behind by adult migrants responsible for

them” (UNICEF, 2022, p.1). There are approximately one billion international and internal migrants worldwide, whose one or both parents may leave their children with other family members, friends, the wider communities, or even on their own (Zhao et al., 2018).

In China, “left-behind” children refer to children aged under 18 years remaining at home while one or both of their parents migrate internally, often to pursue work opportunities in urban areas for more than six months (All-China Women’s Federation, 2013). Approximately 25 percent of Chinese children (68 million) have at least one parent who has migrated internally (Duan et al., 2017).

Summary

As a nation characterized by a robust agricultural sector and a significant rural population, China has prioritized rural revitalization as a prominent national objective. Within this context, rural education assumes a critical role, not only in the overall development of rural communities but also for the broader landscape of education across the country. To promote holistic talent development and reduce educational stress, the Chinese education system has placed greater emphasis on aesthetic education, specifically by developing rural music education. This study aims to delve into the experiences and perspectives of three rural music teachers and a curriculum director in Ren County, an underdeveloped area with extensive rural communities. By gaining first-hand information about the state of rural music education, this research seeks to shed light on the current landscape, enabling us to glean insights directly from those involved in this vital educational domain.

In Chapter 2, I examine the literature to explore the existing research related to this topic and apply it to my study. In Chapter 3, the methodology of the study will be described. Data will be analyzed and interpreted in subsequent chapters.

Chapter 2

Review of Literature

In rural areas, music programs in schools face significant challenges, such as a scarcity of music teachers, limited resources, and insufficient financial support. This exacerbates educational disparities, particularly for "left-behind" children due to the absence of parental care. This chapter undertakes an analysis of several studies that explore various facets of rural music education in China. The chapter is structured into three sections, each focusing on distinct aspects: (1) the status of rural education and music education in China, (2) the teaching experiences of rural music teachers in China, and (3) the role of music in the education of "left-behind" children in rural China. By examining these different dimensions, a comprehensive understanding of the context of rural music education in China can be acquired.

Status of Rural Education and Music Education in China

In China, nearly two-thirds of the population has a rural residency permit (*hukou*), and half live in rural areas—a large share of China's population continues to be educated in rural areas (National Bureau of Statistic, 2021). This section begins with research to present a holistic picture of rural education in China. I then concentrate on music education in rural areas and introduce the opportunities and challenges facing rural music education.

Rural Education

Chinese rural education has made significant strides in the past three decades; however, it still faces a considerable gap when compared to urban education. In 1985, prior to the issuance of the Compulsory Education Law, only 64% of rural elementary school graduates advanced to junior schools (Zhang, 2003). In 2018, Roberts (2018) reported via data from the UNESCO Institute of Statistics that with the Compulsory Education Law in effect, the primary gross

enrollment ratio in China was about 100%. Nevertheless, Yue et al. (2008) proposed that rural students, in comparison to their urban counterparts, face limited opportunities to access upper secondary school due to factors such as poorer teaching quality and inadequate financial support in rural elementary schools. Consequently, the urban-rural education gap continues to be a significant issue.

In the early 2000s, the Chinese government criticized traditional teacher-centered education and implemented a new curriculum focused on a more liberal teaching approach known as “quality education” (*suzhi* education). However, Kipnis (2012) argued that urban students have an advantage in accessing better teachers, private tutors, and other educational resources, while rural students lack outside support to adapt to the more ambiguous curricula. Roberts (2018) further highlights the social issues faced by rural migrant workers and their children, who are often referred to as “floating children” and “left-behind” children. “Left-behind” children often attend boarding schools in their registered township or live with single parents or relatives. Their psychological well-being and health are often at risk. While national policies have directed attention to rural schooling and enrollment rates, many rural students still struggle to maintain good mental health and perform well in middle and high school entrance exams.

Chinese Music Education and Music Textbooks

Music education holds a prominent position within the realm of arts education in Chinese 9-year compulsory education. In 2022, the Ministry of Education in China implemented the Arts Curriculum Standard of Full-time Compulsory Schooling (2022 Version), which requires arts courses to be compulsory for students in grades 1 to 9, constituting approximately 9% to 11% of total class time. The first chapter of this new curriculum, the guiding ideology, prioritizes the

cultivation of students' moral character and the development of their artistic talents as central tasks in compulsory arts education. The aesthetic function is also underscored, aiming to foster students' abilities to appreciate, express, and create beauty, and strengthen their national confidence and sense of pride. As the ability to appreciate music is highlighted, Chinese school music teaching orients more toward music skills and knowledge, while giving less attention to creativity (Law & Ho, 2009).

The emphasis on the connection between music education and moral character can be attributed, in part, to the enduring influence of Confucian educational philosophy throughout China's extensive history (Huang, 1997). Confucianism, with its core teachings centered on the moral education of individuals for the governance of the state through moral virtue (Lawrence, 2000), recognizes that music has a profound impact on human emotions and morality. Proper music education, in accordance with Confucian thought, can facilitate the formation of a well-rounded character in individuals who contribute to a harmonious society.

Wang Guowei, a prominent Chinese scholar and historian, posited that moral education is fundamentally rooted in aesthetic education (Zuo, 2018). As a prerequisite, students must develop the ability to discern and derive inspiration from beauty. Consequently, they can subsequently foster a virtuous disposition and conduct that aligns with the aesthetic ideals they have embraced. In the 20th century, Chinese education, influenced by Western philosophers like Immanuel Kant and Bennett Reimer and championed by renowned Chinese educators Cai Yuanpei and Wang Guowei, involves "aesthetic education" as a core concept, with Chinese music education specifically focused on achieving aesthetic goals (Yu & Leung, 2019). However, within the context of a score-oriented education system, the motivations of contemporary Chinese parents and schools are often considered "utilitarian" (Xie & Leung,

2011). As students grow older and face increased academic competition, they may gradually lose their time and interest in music learning.

In the compulsory education stage, music instruction needs to be conducted in accordance with the textbooks. Music textbooks are subject to regulatory oversight and must meet curriculum standards while also complying with relevant laws, such as intellectual property rights. It is the responsibility of each provincial education department to choose suitable teaching materials from nationally approved textbooks and facilitate their publication at the local level. Schools are required to follow both national and local policies when selecting teaching materials for their students

In Henan Province, most schools are using textbooks published by the "People's Music Publishing House." These textbooks consist of six units per semester, with each unit divided into 3-4 sections, including listening, performance, playing, and creative activities. Students progressively learn and appreciate Chinese folk songs, children's songs, and excerpts from traditional Chinese opera, which showcase the rich cultural heritage of China. All the musical scores in the textbooks are written in numeric notation (*jianpu* 简谱) format. The repertoire comprises Chinese music over Western music, with a comparatively lesser inclusion of music from other regions across the globe. The ethical education-related songs are integrated throughout the entire set of textbooks. Feng (2021) categorized moral-related pieces into five genres: patriotism education (29.49%), ecological civilization education (24.15%), citizenship education (20.22%), emotional moral education (13.48%), and other moral education (12.64%). For example, the third unit of the first grade, themed "Hello, Motherland," includes songs such as "Beautiful National Flag," which praises the motherland, and "Sing Together," which celebrates ethnic unity. The fifth unit focuses on "Love Labor" and includes songs like

"Washcloth" and "Let's Work Together." The fifth unit of the fourth grade, titled "Scenic Beauty," praises the beauty of nature and teaches students about environmental protection.

Figure 2

"Beautiful National Flag" (a singing piece in the third unit of the first-grade textbook)



Figure 3

"Washcloth" (a singing piece in the fifth unit of the first-grade textbook)

第5课 爱劳动

洗手绢

1=C 2/4
歌谣风

红太阳，	白云彩，
妈妈洗衣我也来。	
妈妈	我也来。
哎哟哎哟哎哟哎!	
哎哟哎哟哎哟哎!	
哎哟哎哟哎!	

白手绢，花手绢，
自己洗来自己晒。
哎哟哎哟哎哟哎!
哎哟哎哟哎哟哎!
哎哟哎哟哎!

1. 与老师合作唱一唱。

6 6 6 5 | 6 3 | 6 6 5 | 6 - |
我们来劳动哟， ai luoluolu lu.

2. 用 和 为歌曲伴奏。

Since China's reform and opening, the deepening of globalization and the prevalence of social media have made popular music become the mainstream of music art, gaining popularity among the public, especially the younger generation. According to Xie and Leung (2011), who conducted a questionnaire with 2,750 Chinese students in middle and high schools, it was found that, similar to students in other countries, the majority of children have a strong preference for pop music. This preference contrasts with the music they are exposed to in their school music programs. Within the context of school music education, popular music is not the prevailing genre, and there is only a limited inclusion of popular songs with positive meanings in the textbooks. For example, the third grade includes a 1980s pop song called "Childhood," which describes carefree childhood life. The sixth grade includes the song "The Same Song" composed for the 1990 Asian Games in Beijing and a American film song "Do Re Mi."

In summary, music education has long been recognized as an effective and meaningful approach to promoting moral and aesthetic education, with the aim of enhancing individual character and fostering social harmony in China. The moral education content is integrated throughout the repertoire of textbooks published by the People's Music Publishing House, with a particular focus on patriotism, ecological civilization education, and citizenship. Although popular songs are prevalent among young people, they are not actively encouraged within the school education system.

Rural Music Education

In rural China, only 30% of music teachers are employed full-time (Basic Education Quality Testing Center, 2019). After conducting a survey involving 126 music teachers and 674 students from rural schools in China's Tonghua region, Sun and Leung (2014) made several significant observations in rural music education. They found that the majority of schools (81%) in their research offered two music lessons per week in each class, while 17% offered one lesson per week. This was considered a notable improvement, indicating an increasing focus on music education. Also, the typical class size in rural areas has decreased in recent years. Previously, rural classes would consist of around 60 to 70 students, whereas now the class size typically ranges from 40 to 50 students. However, most schools lacked dedicated music classrooms or activity rooms; therefore, music teachers often carry their keyboards and teach in students' regular classrooms.

According to information provided by the Tonghua education department (Sun & Leung, 2014), there were a total of 564 full-time music teachers in the rural area, with 397 (70.39%) being female and 167 (29.61%) being male. The gender ratio among music teachers in this region was approximately 7:3. The survey also revealed that the most common content in music

education was listening and music appreciation (60%) as well as unison/part singing (58%). Over 72% of teachers reported frequently incorporating choir teaching into their classrooms.

Additionally, music teachers expressed the greatest concern for teaching creative music and instrumental music.

Wang (2004) investigated the status of music programs, the music teachers' demographics, and students' concepts toward music in 175 rural schools in Hunan Province. He distributed 628 questionnaires to students, parents, music teachers, and administrators in these schools. 539 questionnaires were analyzed, and results indicated that while the Chinese government was advocating holistic education, the middle school examination still forced local bureaus, principals, and parents to ignore the importance of music education in rural schools. Wang (2004) further asserted that teaching quality is a significant concern in rural music education. Of the rural schools surveyed, about 11% do not provide students with textbooks; 62% of rural music teachers do not follow the curriculum guidance; and none of the rural teachers have bachelor's degrees. Fewer middle-aged teachers reflected the low retention rate of young teachers—young teachers sought to change careers shortly after starting in music education. For some rural music teachers, their positions are seen as entry-level jobs that serve as a stepping-stone to other positions or career opportunities. This phenomenon contributes to the scarcity of experienced and seasoned music educators in rural areas.

The results regarding rural students' attitudes toward music showed that 74% of students indicated that they like music, but only 35% of students enjoyed music classes, which suggested that most rural music classes did not exert a positive influence on students' interests. Considering China's socio-historical realities, Wang proposed several measures, such as developing local

music resources, improving the rural trans-school teaching patterns, and setting up a specific fund for rural music education.

Fu (2015), a music research fellow at Jilin Provincial College of Education, examined the progress of rural music education in Jilin Province in Northeast China. In recent years, given the advocacy for quality education, school administrators have increasingly approved of the value of music, and the proportion of full-time to part-time music teachers has risen. As the Provincial Educational Bureau invested more in rural music programs, an increasing number of rural schools have been able to procure audio equipment and dedicate a classroom to music. Nonetheless, Fu (2015) admitted that music remains a vulnerable subject in the school education system in rural settings. Music teachers perceived challenges, including the low priority of music programs in schools, a large shortage of specific music teachers, the poor professional competence of teachers, and the lack of financial support. Based on the information collected from rural school administrators and music teachers, Fu provided several suggestions for promoting rural music programs: regularly organizing teachers' training and communication conferences, building a bridge between urban and rural music education, and establishing a comprehensive teaching evaluation system.

In rural areas, non-formal music education has traditionally been provided by state-funded arts and cultural organizations, including institutions like children's palaces, cultural centers, and senior citizens' universities, as highlighted by Sun (2009). However, this form of community music education has encountered significant challenges in both rural and some urban areas due to factors such as increased commercialization, weak administration, and difficulties in adapting to market demands. According to Cen (2012), individuals above the age of 40 tend to be regular participants in low-investment music activities, such as square dances. These self-

organized evening activities have attracted the participation of many children, but they have occasionally resulted in complaints from residents around (Liu & Zhao, 2017).

In summary, these articles present a comprehensive portrait of rural education in China, including the benefits and difficulties of rural school music education (Sun & Leung, 2014; Fu, 2015; Wang, 2004), as well as the non-formal music education in rural areas (Liu & Zhao, 2017). Through analyzing three articles a decade apart in rural music education, we see that some problems have been alleviated within ten years, such as the increase in music class hours, the proportion of full-time music teachers, and equipment available for music teaching. However, many persistent structure problems remain, like a low priority for music, teachers' professional capacity, and limited financial budgets.

The Teaching Life of Rural Music Teachers

Music teachers play a pivotal role in the quality of rural education. Some authors have explored the teaching quality and experience of rural music teachers. These studies have examined various aspects of their work and the factors influencing their performance.

Cao (2011) conducted research on the occupational happiness of music teachers in Changsha City, the capital of Hunan Province, by distributing a survey to 110 elementary and junior music teachers and interviewing six of them. Of the 91 teachers who responded to the survey, 58.24% were primary teachers and 10.99% were rural teachers. Cao concluded that teachers with work experience of under two years and over 21 years seem to be more "self-actualized" and "holistically happy"; female teachers are more satisfied with their profession than their male counterparts; and, although urban teachers are more content with their work environments and pay, they do not necessarily consider themselves "happier." External factors, such as interpersonal relationships with colleagues, superiors, students, and parents, social status,

and compensation, significantly affect teachers' perception of happiness. On a personal level, individual professionalism, ethics, and outlooks are also determining factors of happiness.

More recently, Zhou (2019) focused on the professional quality of music teachers and considered it as a multi-dimensional concept, comprising four aspects: professional moral quality, basic music knowledge, music understanding and music performance. Zhou surveyed 85 rural educators in Liuyang City and analyzed 80 of them. He also randomly selected 40 educators for a brief interview. The analysis revealed a close correlation between age and teachers' commitment: teachers under 29 years old are more likely to suffer from financial pressure and they may not have enough energy to concentrate on work; teachers between the ages of 30 and 50 have accumulated abundant teaching experiences enhancing their work enthusiasm; teachers beyond 50 years are more comfortable with their status and prefer to follow the daily routine.

Music teachers in rural China face a number of common challenges, including being required to perform multiple roles, experiencing resource scarcity, coping with heavy workloads, encountering a significant urban-rural education gap, and having limited opportunities to develop professional skills. These studies shed light on the experiences and qualities of rural music teachers, highlighting the complexities and multifaceted nature of their profession.

Music in the Education of Children “Left-behind” in Rural China

In China, “left-behind” children refer to those aged under 18 years remaining at their parents' residence while one or both parents migrate internally for over six months. According to the 2015 National Population Sample Survey, approximately 25 percent of Chinese children (approximately 68 million) have at least one parent who has migrated internally. Due to China's rapid urbanization, the vast majority of these children reside in rural areas (approximately 54

million children) (Duan et al., 2017). Furthermore, by comparing the population data in 2005 and 2015, Duan unveiled that the regional distribution of rural “left-behind” children is concentrated in a few labor-exporting provinces, especially in Henan Province. More than 57 % of rural students in Henan experience long-term separation from their parents, which is the highest rate in China.

A considerable amount of research worldwide proves that prolonged separation raises children’s risks of psychological disorders, low self-esteem, the tendency to feel lonely and depressed, substance abuse and low school performance (Chen & Sun, 2015; de la Garza, 2010). Based on the quantitative survey in Tonghua Town, Jilin Province, Miao (2021) proposed that because “left-behind” children are at a critical stage of self-identity, self-evaluation, and personality development, growing up without a parental relationship can easily cause further social-emotional and behavior problems with other negative impacts. Additionally, weak knowledge of psychological concepts and insufficient educational resources in rural areas exacerbate the vulnerability of local “left-behind” children. As these students’ living conditions are becoming crucial social concerns, China’s government issued successive policy regulations on youth mental health education and promoted the care and protection of rural “left-behind” children to a prominent position in rural revitalization (Miao, 2021).

In contrast, some studies have shown that there exist some children whose mental health was not affected by unfavorable living conditions. These children formed protective strategies to offset hurts, including seeking social support from parents, communities and peers and positively coping with issues (Tan, 2011). Zhao suggested that “Coping ability with migration-related stress depends on the child’s personality traits, family functioning and support within the extended family and the community” (2018, p. 2). Therefore, the psychological health of “left-behind”

children is closely correlated to complex and intricate elements such as resilience, well-equipped guardians, and support from the community and schools. Although the prolonged absence of parental attachment places children in a vulnerable position, schools and teachers can enhance students' well-being by providing psychological support (Zhao, 2018).

For children living in a disadvantaged environment, music education provides a significant path to maintaining psychological health and developing aspirations (Catterall, 2012). In the context of the heavy academic workload for students in China, Chen (2020) reported that music intervention effectively improves the subjective well-being of rural "left-behind" children. Chen first conducted a survey exploring factors that affect the subjective well-being of rural students and then processed an eight-week music intervention for 131 sixth graders in Chasang primary school, Jiujiang City. The result of the survey suggests that, in general, rural children separated from their parents have less satisfaction with family, school, living environment, self-performance and emotional status than children accompanied by parents. However, after eight-week music interventions, "left-behind" children in the experimental group reported closer relationships with teachers and peers and a noticeable promotion in subjective well-being compared to when the intervention began.

Catterall (2012) also proved that children with disadvantaged backgrounds are most likely to benefit from arts learning. Researchers explored the information on arts involvement by analyzing interviews, academic transcripts, assessments, questionnaires, and survey data of 71,610 five to 25-year-olds in large-scale, long-term, and national data sets. The results showed that the academic and civic engagement level of at-risk children with intensive arts experiences approaches even exceeds the general level and is much higher than minors with limited arts participants. Moreover, deep arts involvement is positively related to the aspirations for college

and professional careers, narrowing the gap between disadvantaged and advantaged students and facilitating educational equity.

In summary, “left-behind” children’s mental health and living situations have a profound impact on China's social and educational conditions in the coming decades. These studies indicated that children “left-behind” encounter several challenging conditions, but they also present unique opportunities. As music education can statistically improve children's well-being and contribute benefits to minors, music teachers, schools, and communities should proactively support “left-behind” children in healthy growth by providing high-quality music lessons.

Summary

In sum, although the student enrollment ratio reached 100% in rural primary areas, the gap between rural and urban education is still significant. In order to develop quality (*sushi*) education, the Chinese government has advocated aesthetic education in schools. However, the underlying assessment structure that focuses on academic scores has not changed, contributing to the persistent vulnerable status of music programs in schools. Correspondingly, most rural music teachers live in a challenging situation. They are suffering from resource poverty, heavy workload, and fewer professional development opportunities, which negatively impacts rural music teacher retention rates and the quality of music instruction. Additionally, in rural areas, ensuring the education of "left-behind" children is crucial for their healthy growth and the harmonious development of society as a whole. Considering the aforementioned articles' insights, it becomes evident that high-quality music education plays an essential role in meeting the educational needs of "left-behind" children.

Chapter 3

Methodology

Purpose and Research Questions

This study investigated the perception and experiences of rural music educators in Henan Province, China. The study focused on the values of general music education and revealed students' music learning experiences through the lenses of rural music educators. The main research question was: What are the participants' experiences of teaching general music education in rural schools in Ren County (a pseudonym), Henan Province? There were two guiding questions: a) What is the value and role of music education in rural schools and communities? b) How do participants describe students and their music learning experiences?

Research Design

The chosen approach for this study is qualitative, seeking to comprehensively present the experience of three music teachers and one curriculum director in their positions in Ren County. Qualitative research greatly emphasizes a holistic description of the phenomenon, setting, or topic of interest, rather than representing data in numerical ways (Mertler, 2017, p. 161). Based on the research methods described by Mertler (2021), this study collected data from a pre-study survey, interviews, photographs, personal documents, researcher memos, and official records. The format of the interview is semi-structured. Data analysis was conducted on four overall topics: a) the context of rural music teachers and music programs, b) the value of rural music education in national policy, c) the value of rural music education in participants' schools, and d) students and their learning experiences.

Context of the Study

All participants are working in Ren County, Henan Province, China. Ren County is a county in the southwestern Henan Province with a population of more than 750 thousand, of which 64.84% is rural ([Ren] County Bureau of Statistics, 2021). It has 70,000 elementary school students, and rural schools serve roughly 45,000 elementary students. Ren County is one of the less-developed areas in Henan Province with a below-average GDP. Before 2019, Ren County had been a provincial poverty-stricken county. What is more concerning is that during the pandemic, rural economic disadvantages were accelerated, and subsequently, the quality of life and learning for rural children have been negatively affected.

Positionality of the Researcher

I was a volunteer music teacher in a rural elementary school (not included in this study) in Ren County for a total of eight months across four summers (2016-2019). I taught music classes from first to sixth grades, directed a student choir, and organized a series of music activities, such as concerts, gala parties, and musical competitions in the school. The volunteer teaching experiences influenced me to conduct subsequent studies about rural music education and marginalized students in rural settings. In the present research, I did not serve as a volunteer teacher; instead, I limited my role to that of researcher and gathered data by surveying and interviewing teachers and directors and collecting related data from their schools.

Selection of Participants

In this study, the key participants are three rural elementary music teachers and one music director. All the names of the participants are pseudonyms. In order to represent a multidimensional picture of rural music education in Ren County, the criteria for the selection of three music teachers are that 1) the schools are located in rural areas in Ren County, 2) the

teachers in rural experimental schools have more than five years of music teaching experience and the teachers in remote rural schools have at least two years teaching, 3) teachers are currently teaching music classes in rural schools, and 4) teachers are willing to share experiences with the researcher for the purpose of this study. The principal of the rural elementary school where I taught during the summer facilitated my connection with a music specialist in Ren County, who then recommended Mrs. Wan to me. Mrs. Wan subsequently introduced me to the curriculum director, Director Mei, and another music teacher at an experimental school, Mrs. Mao. Despite struggling to find a music teacher in a remote rural school, Director Mei eventually assisted me in connecting with Mr. Yang, a special-position music teacher in such a school. More information about three rural teachers is included in Table 2 below.

As the curriculum director of the Ren County Education Bureau, Director Mei holds the primary responsibility for overseeing educational activities related to music while also managing all subjects within the county. Director Mei's role involves providing guidance and supervision to local music teachers in the implementation of national educational policies and curriculum requirements. Additionally, Director Mei takes charge of organizing various music activities within the county. She is also a director of the official elementary music teachers' workshops in Ren County and regularly organizes seminars and supports new music teachers. Director Mei knows the overall educational system in Ren County, understands music education as a piece of a large puzzle, and is familiar with the development plan for local music education. In China, curriculum directors establish a bridge between national policy and instructional practices. They are more likely to depict a holistic and macro perspective of rural music education in this county.

Table 1

Educational System in Rural Areas of Ren County

County Level	Ren County Educational Bureau	
County Level	Ren County Teacher and Research Office - Curriculum Director: Director Wei	
Township Level	18 townships - one central school (central administrations) in one township - Directors of central schools	
Township Level	One or two experimental elementary schools in one township - Mrs. Wan and Mrs. Mao in different townships	Other rural schools and teaching sites (mini public schools) - Mr. Yang

Table 2

Teachers' and Their Schools

	Teacher Wan	Teacher Mao	Teacher Yang
School Information	Tan Town Experimental Elementary School - Boarding School - Grades 3-6 - 870+students	Xieli Town Experimental Elementary School - Boarding School - Grade 3-6 - 1000+ students	Tongli Town Elementary School - Remote Rural Public/ Teaching Site - Grade 1- 4 - 93 students
	50 – 75% students are “left-behind” children.		
Teaching Years and Positions	- 9 years - Music Teacher - Publicity Specialist for the Central School	- 11 years - Music Teacher	- 2 years - Special Position Teacher (SPT) - Teach Math, English, and Music - Manage Youth Pioneer in the school
Music Programs	- 2 music lessons per week - 2 live online music classes for all second grades students in the town - 16 classes in total.	- 2 music lessons per week - 1 special music class for selected students every day - 22-24 classes total.	- 1 music lesson per week - The time is flexible and decided by teachers.
	Music activities: Traditional Culture Festival; 2 County-wide Music Festival; Theme-Based Music Activities for Important Holidays.		

Gaining Permissions and Access

After my research proposal was approved by the school's committee board and my thesis committee, I submitted an application to the University of Michigan Institutional Review Board (IRB) for approval for the study. For the pre-survey and recorded interviews, I provided participants with an informed consent form (see Appendix A), which described what their participation entailed, and then required them to sign the form if they agreed to participate in the study (Mertler, 2021, p. 114). I ensured that participants were informed that their participation in the study was voluntary, and that they could withdraw at any point.

Preparation for Data Collection

I conducted a preparatory study the month before I began the formal research study. I invited two elementary music teachers to participate, endeavoring to identify useful questions and thematic areas for in-depth and appropriate interviews with participants of the main study (Crossman, 2019). I distributed the cover letter, pre-survey, and interview questions to the teachers to seek feedback about the questions and length of time. The participants were asked to give feedback and suggestions regarding the clarity and relevance of the questions.

Data Collection and Procedure

Sources of data collection sources were included: 1) a pre-study survey, 2) two semi-structured interviews with three music teachers, 3) one semi-structured interview with the curriculum director, 4) researcher reflective journal, and 5) documents and media (curriculum guides, lesson plans, recordings of teaching and activities).

Schuman (1982) suggested a series of three separate interviews to place people's lives in the contexts. Seidman (2019) was inspired by Schuman to develop his interview method and explicitly describe the benefits and current use of the three interview formats. He stated that the

first interview establishes the contexts of the interviewees; the second allows participants to reconstruct their experiences within the contexts; the third guides interviewers to review the meaning of participants' experiences.

Based on this interview theory and research format, I condensed the three interviews into one pre-study survey and two semi-structured interviews for each of the three music teachers. The purpose of a series of interviews is to encourage participants to reconstruct their experiences with the topic under study (Seidman, 2019). In terms of the curriculum director, I conducted one interview to gain her perspectives on local music education. I uploaded the pre-survey to a Chinese survey App and shared the link with teachers through WeChat. Teachers filled out the survey in the App and sent them back to me.

Pre-survey

Similar to the function of the first interview Seidman provided, the pre-survey (see Appendix C) was first distributed to three teachers with questions related to demographics and individual experiences of music education. The three teachers were expected to concretely answer the demographic questions and briefly answer the experiences questions. Through this survey, I learned about the interviewees' backgrounds and had them reconstruct their past music-teaching experiences.

Two Semi-structured Interviews

The first semi-structured interview. After I received the completed survey from teachers, I conducted the first interview with each teacher online based on their schedule. I asked specific questions for this interview, taking into account teachers' responses to the pre-survey. The first interview for teachers (see Appendix D) lasted around 90 minutes and was composed of two parts. In the first part, I asked participants to explain and give more details of their brief

answers about early experiences reported in the pre-survey. This part provided interviewees with a context to explore their present teachings in formal school programs in the context of their lives (Seidman, 2019). In the second part, I concentrated on exploring participants' present teaching experiences and the information about their schools' communities, upon which their opinions may be built (Seidman, 2019). I asked them to describe their routines, relationships with the students and other stakeholders in the school community, and specific skills for rural music teaching. This interview contained participants' community information, early experiences, and their present work.

The second semi-structured interview. Around one week after completing the first interview with all participants, I conducted the second one with each of the three music teachers for around 90 minutes. Based on the previous survey and interview one, music teachers began to construct a foundation for understanding their own experiences, making sense of themselves as rural teachers and their relationship with the school community, and recognizing the critical factors affecting rural education. Hence, the second interview (see Appendix E) attempted to reflect on participants' observations, role identity, values, thoughts, and future plans in the rural music education field. For the curriculum director, I conducted her interview (see Appendix F) after the teachers' interviews and developed specific questions about local music education policy, curriculum planning and the attitude and viewpoints of teachers and administrators.

The pre-survey and interviews served a purpose both by themselves and within the series (Seidman, 2019). The survey took participants half an hour to finish. The first and second interviews both took three music teachers around one and a half hours to complete. I spaced the pre-survey and each interview around a week apart, leaving enough time for interviewees to think and maintain continuity. All pre-survey and interviews were conducted online in

September and October of 2022. I confirmed the interview dates with participants through WeChat, an accessible and convenient social media platform, and I interviewed them using TenCent Meeting, which is a popular online meeting App in China.

Researcher Reflective Journal

This reflective journal was written by me to record the process of conducting research, especially for the pre-survey and interviews, which included the details of the researcher's experiences, observations, thoughts, and feelings throughout the research process. Jasper (2005) states that reflective research "is to facilitate the researcher's discovery and provides a verifiable audit trail of the research process" (p. 250).

Reflective journals are helpful for multiple interviews. Ortlipp (2008) notes that the interviewer's thoughts, feelings, and instincts impact the interviews, but it is not evident in the record. Therefore, the reflective journal makes the unconsciousness conscious, helping the researcher to explicitly map the role and continuously promote the framework based on the research purpose. Furthermore, I wrote down my observations during interviews and explored the underlying meaning of laughter, expression, and movement. Seidman (2019) suggests that when you doubt some answers, you need to trust your instincts "to figure out the questions that best express them, and to ask it" (p. 97).

Documents and Media

With the goal of presenting a vivid picture of teachers' routines and teaching lives, I encouraged participants to share materials about their music programs or daily life, such as curriculum guides, lesson plans, and videos of their classes or students' performance. The specific materials were determined by the teachers' willingness and by what was available at the time of the study.

Data Recording

All interviews were audio, video recorded and transcribed by me.

Table 3*Timeline of Data Collection*

	Research Process
May 2022	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Completed the research proposal 2) Got approval from the thesis committee 3) Processed the preparatory survey and interviewed the two teachers 4) Redesigned the survey and interview based on the teacher's feedback
July – August 2022	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Submitted study application for approval by IRB 2) Confirmed the participants 3) Sent informed consents to participants and get approval from them and administrators
Early September 2022	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Distributed pre-study survey to participants 2) Participants completed pre-survey and I reviewed interview questions based on the pre-survey
Middle September 2022	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Conducted the first interview with three teachers first 2) Reviewed the questions for the second interview based on the first one.
Late September – October 2022	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Conducted the second interview with all participants.
November – January 2023	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Transcribed interviews 2) Sent transcriptions to participants to check

February - April 2023	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Created code scheme for the data 2) Translated important contents from Mandarin to English 3) Analyzed and interpreted the data 4) Wrote final thesis
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Resource Needs

This study did not need funding or any specific resources. I used TenCent Meeting to conduct and record interviews and used WeChat to confirm the time and transfer files.

Translation of Documents and Participants' Interviews

As all participants are Chinese and the topic is about music education in China, the whole process of research was in Mandarin. I'm a native speaker of Mandarin. I translated all the documents from English to Mandarin and then from Mandarin back to English. Also, I contacted and sent all the documents to participants in Mandarin via WeChat, and conducted interviews through Tencent Meeting.

Firstly, I designed my study in English for consulting professors and the IRB application. Then, I translated the consent form (see Appendix B), the pre-survey and the interview questions into Mandarin, and sent them to all participants in this research study. The entire process of virtual communication, pre-survey, and interviews with participants was conducted in Mandarin. After completing the pre-survey and interview, I transcribed the contents and sent the Mandarin transcriptions to participants to check. I then analyzed the Mandarin transcriptions and interpreted the connection between the data and research questions. In the final step, I translated the useful parts into English and cited them in my thesis in English to ensure accessibility.

Ethical Considerations and Trustworthiness

In this study, validity is embodied in these aspects of the research process: 1) IRB review, 2) informed consent, 3) ethical considerations and 4) participants' member checking of data.

First and foremost, this study proposal was submitted to the University of Michigan Institutional Review Board (IRB) for approval. Second, an informed consent form was signed by every participant to ensure that they knew the research information, potential risks, participants' rights, possible benefits, confidentiality, and contact information (Seidman, 2019). I provided the form with English and Mandarin translations. Third, before I conducted the interview, I distributed the pre-survey to learn about my interviewees' backgrounds and assessed the interview questions based on their contexts to minimize any negative effects of the interviews. Fourth, after finishing the interview, I ensured that participants were informed and made sure that what I thought they were seeing and hearing was what they were seeing and hearing (Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2012).

Data Analysis

The general approach to analyzing qualitative data is an inductive analysis that focuses on three main steps: organization of data, description of coded themes, and interpretation of those themes (Mertler, 2021, p. 309). In the first step, after I collected all the data by interviewing my participants, I transcribed the interviews and then sent the transcription to participants to get their suggestions and avoid any misunderstandings. Then I reviewed and analyzed the transcripts, waded through filed notes, developed the coding scheme, and coded the key concepts (Hunt, 2009). The third step was to identify the main characteristics of these categories and interpret the connections between the data in light of the research questions. In the final step, I examined events, behaviors, or other observations—as represented in the coded categories—for relationships, similarities, contradictions, and so on (Parsons & Brown, 2002).

Significance

For many years, rural music education has been in a disadvantaged and vulnerable position, neglected by the mainstream – especially evident in the lack of music education for rural “left-behind” children. Furthermore, because of the richness and diversity of rural features, the single definition cannot “portray an accurate representation of rural life, education and music education specifically” (Spring, 2013). Therefore, the most clear and appropriate resources for rural music education are local educators’ visions and narratives.

The objective of this case study was to present reliable perspectives of rural music education in Ren County, with a focus on music educators’ practices and students’ music experiences. As participants are in different positions and teach in different regions in Ren County, the commonality of their experiences and concepts reflects the current situation of rural music education in this county. In the same vein, the variations between teachers and schools effectively helped identify the significant factors affecting the quality of music programs in rural areas. While the goal of this study was not to overgeneralize the findings given the limited specific contexts, the insights gained from firsthand accounts of music in school education can still provide valuable information for educators and administrators, potentially leading to the development of expanded resources. In this case, they can be informed about how to improve the development of rural music education and how to educate students of diverse backgrounds.

In chapter 4, I introduce each teacher’s background and their previous experiences. In chapter 5 and 6, I present and analyze the data based on participants’ transcriptions to answer the two guiding questions – the value of rural music education from national policy to participants’ schools, and students and their learning experiences. In chapter 7, I conceptualize the findings and provide insights and implications for future research and practice in this area.

Chapter 4

Presentation of Participants

This chapter presents a profile of each teacher participating in the study, including their background, experiences, and current work in rural music teaching. By drawing on pre-survey data, interviews, and notes taken during our interactions, I aim to provide a better understanding of each participant's perceptions and insights.

Mrs. Wan and the Tan Town Experimental Elementary School (EXP)

Mrs. Wan was the first teacher the Ren County music specialist recommended to me. The director informed me that Mrs. Wan could facilitate introductions to other potential interviewees. Notably, she is actively involved in the County affairs and assists the County's education staff. Mrs. Wan possesses a warm and communicative personality, and she readily engaged in open discussions and generously shared comprehensive information about local music education.

Mrs. Wan has been a general music teacher at Tan Town Experimental Elementary School for nine years. In rural China, an experimental school is typically the most-resourced school in the township, with more music teachers and activities. Regarding the music equipment in Tan Town Experimental Elementary School, they have a dedicated music classroom with 20 electronic pianos, two electric pianos, two drum sets, a big snare drum, and some small percussion instruments. However, due to the limited number of instruments available compared to the size of the classes, not all students can be assigned an instrument, resulting in the underutilization of these resources.

In addition to daily teaching duties, Mrs. Wan is a publicity specialist for the Educational Committee in the central school (administration). Her responsibility is collecting and documenting well-organized school music activities across the township. She is also a core

member of the music teaching workshop in Ren County, led by Director Mei, to document studio events, post events summaries and update information online. Thus, Mrs. Wan is an ideal participant for the interview who can share valuable insights into the school and township-level music program.

Mrs. Wan began her professional vocal learning in high school. She had a keen interest in music and saw it as a potentially more accessible route to gain admission to a reputable college, because college music major often has lower academic grades requirement. She successfully enrolled in a bachelor's program in music education at Henan Normal University, recognized as the leading normal college in the Henan province. There, she met a professor who profoundly impacted her future career and teaching philosophy, as well as her personal life. Mrs. Wan's professor, Lin, who had just graduated from overseas studies when she taught Wang, was "seemingly inexhaustible in her enthusiasm for students" (Wan, interview, September 21, 2022). Professor Lin consistently presented each of her students' lessons to the best of her ability and never grew tired of demonstrating a variety of techniques. Lin had a very close relationship with her students. The undergraduates spent all day in her office observing lessons and discussing vocal techniques, and after class, they went out together and shared interesting things. Mrs. Wan recalled, "The impact she had on me was lifelong" (Wan, interview, September 21, 2022). Mrs. Wan thinks she is very fortunate to study with this serious but compassionate professor during her undergraduate studies.

In conversation with Mrs. Wan, it was difficult to reconcile her current, confident demeanor with her earlier timidity and introversion during high school. She credits her transformation to the unwavering encouragement and support of Professor Lin, whose guidance helped her to realize and exploit her full potential. Now, even 12 years after her graduation, the

lessons she learned from her professor—a commitment to professionalism, a passion for learning, and a positive outlook on life—continue to inspire and motivate her. Mrs. Wan admitted that after teaching 4 or 5 classes for hundreds of students a day, she felt exhausted sometimes and wanted to have a relaxed demeanor while teaching in the class. However, when she saw the innocent eyes of her students, her professor's guidance would appear in her mind — “As a teacher, never teach students in a perfunctory way”—which reminded her to provide the best instruction to students at any time (Wan, interview, September 21, 2022).

Indeed, following her graduation from college, Mrs. Wan did not initially pursue music teaching as her primary career choice. One factor was a lack of suitable working opportunities at that time; another factor was that Mrs. Wan's mother was a teacher, and she witnessed how busy she was in her career. Mrs. Wan recalled, “My mom seems to revolve around her students every day. She would arrive at school early and bring homework back home to grade until night. I feel like I don't want to become a teacher; It's too hard.” In the year of her graduation, college-graduate village officials were very popular. Along with this trend, Mrs. Wan worked as a village official for four years in a local government, which had no relation to music at all. She admitted that she didn't make progress during these four years and felt music was disappearing from her life. Her family also thought that she should leverage the music skills she learned in college and find a more stable job. In 2014, she registered for the Ren County Teachers' Recruitment Examination and successfully secured a position as a rural music instructor at her current institution. In Ren County, newly appointed educators are typically assigned to rural schools for a period of time to hone their pedagogical skills and then they are given the option to teach in either urban or rural contexts. Mrs. Wan characterized herself as risk-averse and hesitant to

embrace new experiences, so she chose to stay in a rural school because she was used to everything in the rural areas.

In the first two years, she described her teaching as “in a flurry of activities.” At that time, she also served as a class tutor. Her works were related to music but also entangled in many complicated affairs. Mrs. Wan states that as she progressed into the third and fourth years of teaching, everything was gradually settled, and she began to reflect on her teaching and explore to enhance the efficiency of music classes and develop stronger connections with her students.

Since 2018, thanks to Director Mei’s emphasis on music, Ren County has implemented a series of music activities in the counties, reviving the local music program and energizing music teachers. They held music teaching competitions, music teachers’ music skills competitions, and public music lessons, and established a music studio for music teaching and research. Mrs. Wan was also strongly motivated by this trend, and she actively participated in various music events in the township and county. Through the successive conduct of music activities and professional development, Mrs. Wan had opportunities to refine their teaching methods and manifest their competence. The status of music teacher was elevated. Mrs. Wan noted that a few years ago, music teachers were not recognized for their exceptional lectures due to the lack of opportunities to showcase their abilities. However, things are different now. With the increasing number of music-related activities, many music teachers have demonstrated their expertise and received honors, which can contribute to their credits in the teacher promotion system (Wan, interview, September 21, 2022).

Mrs. Mao and the Xieli Town Experimental Elementary School (EXP)

Mrs. Mao has been working as a music teacher at Xieli Town Experimental Elementary School for over a decade. Mrs. Wan introduced Mrs. Mao to me. Upon graduating from

Shangqiu Normal University in 2010, Mrs. Mao taught at an after-school music institution for two years and participated in the Teacher Recruitment Examination in Ren County in 2012. She was subsequently assigned to her current institution due to its proximity to her family.

When asked about her decision to return to rural areas, Mrs. Mao felt this was a natural and expected choice for her, as she has studied music education for four years at a normal college. She also believed that her personality and experience were well-suited for working in the educational system. She likes to be around children and finds it easier to interact with them within the school system rather than elsewhere. Additionally, rural people view being a teacher as a respectful profession. Hence, when Mrs. Mao learned that her county was recruiting teachers, she applied without much hesitation.

As an experimental school, Xieli Town Experimental Elementary School is one of the most resourced and largest schools in the Xieli township. There are three music teachers in the school responsible for instructing over 1,000 students from third to sixth grades. Mrs. Mao provides twice-weekly music classes to third and fourth graders. Additionally, she leads a Chinese Opera special class, which is provided by the school free to charge, and trains students to participate in county-level music activities. Her school also offers students in dance, and choral singing, with enrollment based on student talent and interest. Mrs. Mao indicated that the main goal of these classes is to encourage students to perform, and typically, admission is granted to those who show a strong interest. Students tend to enjoy these classes more than their academic studies, but the class requires additional commitment from the teachers as well as from the students, as rehearsals are often held during breaks.

In total, Mrs. Mao dedicates over 20 45-minute classes to her teaching duties each week. Generally, music classes are arranged after the third class as the school prioritizes academic

courses during the mornings when students are most alert. The music teachers are expected to follow the prescribed textbook curriculum but have some flexibility to add supplementary materials once they have completed the textbook. The music assessment is determined by music teachers, with no standardized tests in place. Teachers can decide if they have the final test and what contents they want to involve.

As Xieli Town Experimental Elemental School is a boarding institution, a significant number of students are “left-behind,” children whose parents work in urban areas. These students are primarily looked after by their grandparents. The lack of parental care results in weaker academic and behavioral performance, particularly in music classes which are generally undervalued by their guardians. To address this challenge, Mrs. Mao has been putting significant effort into classroom management and innovative teaching approaches to engage the students.

During the interview, Mrs. Mao mentioned that she is currently experiencing work burnout, “feeling both physically and mentally exhausted every day” (Mao, interview, September 11, 2022). Indeed, in the first few years, she was very passionate about teaching and energetic to complete all her work well. She dedicated all of her time to her students and kept involving innovative teaching methods to cater to her students’ needs. Her commitment to her students has won their admiration and respect. Mrs. Mao has maintained contact with her former students from previous years, a practice that has become increasingly uncommon in recent times. “Most of the students in my QQ or WeChat groups are those I taught in previous years. I have few relationships like this with my current students. Perhaps this is just a natural process” (Mao, interview, September 11, 2022). While Mrs. Mao's teaching goals and original intentions have not changed, it is difficult for her to regain her passion and teach students at her best. Mrs. Mao attributed her burnout to various factors. In the EXP, known as a “demonstration school” 窗口学

校, teachers must handle many inspections from higher-level departments and complete administrative documents. Mrs. Mao thinks that these complicated tasks take up much energy. Furthermore, her family and children are also crucial factors. "When other affairs consume more of your energy, the energy for teaching students becomes less" (Mao, interview, September 11, 2022).

Now, Mrs. Mao is trying to adjust her status, holding an optimistic attitude toward the development of music education in Ren County. As a music teacher in the EXP, Mrs. Mao also has the opportunity to attend in-person music teacher training, which she believes is the most effective kind because she can observe exemplary demo classes directly.

Mr. Yang and the Tongli Town Rural Remote School (RMT)

I interviewed Mr. Yang as the final participant after an extensive search for a music teacher in the rural remote school, which is also called rural teaching site, because of the small size of school. Despite receiving assistance from Mrs. Wan to recruit participants for the study, it is still difficult to find music teachers in RMT. In this case, I sought the help of Director Mei, and she assisted in connecting me with Mr. Yang after several days of searching. This process reflected the scarcity of music educators in RMT and a significant challenge in providing quality music education to students in these regions. During the discussion with Mr. Yang, he also shared that he is almost the only professional music teacher around rural teaching sites in Ren County because typically, the County Education Bureau only hires music specialists for EXP.

Mr. Yang is a teacher with exceptional leadership qualities and a serious and firm demeanor. With extensive experience in teaching bands, he is passionate and self-assured in organizing ensembles and large music events. He holds a clear and definitive philosophy

regarding how music activities should be structured and rehearsed, recognizing the essential role that discipline plays in achieving a successful performance. Mr. Yang stated that,

Without discipline, there is no performance. If the principal requires me to have a show in two days, I can't take up all students' time for rehearsals, so I must make every minute productive. It is impossible to manage more than 100 students without [strict] discipline.

(Yang, interview, October 16, 2022)

Rather than being characterized by warmth and affection, his relationship with the students is defined by mutual respect. Mr. Yang is the sole authority when it comes to music activities at the teaching site, which has gained him the respect of the school's principal and colleagues. In his school, all teachers are required to assist with music activities, and the principal often seeks Mr. Yang's advice on organizing all kinds of school activities. In comparison with the EXP schools, Mr. Yang perceives greater support and recognition for the importance of music education at his current teaching site.

Before getting into the public school system, Mr. Yang was a band teacher at a music company in an urban area for five years. He provided instruction on drum sets and conducted band rehearsals for domestic and international competitions, thereby honing his teaching and organizational skills. In 2019, Mr. Yang transitioned to a role as a music teacher for primary and middle school students in a private institution where he also served as a leader in the arts subjects. One year later, to seek a more stable job and take care of his family in the rural area, Mr. Yang participated in the Examination for Special Position Teacher (SPT) in Ren County. Based on the rankings, he was assigned to a teaching site in Tongli Town, which is the neighboring town of his family.

The Special Position Teacher (SPT) program is a national policy designed to promote compulsory education in rural areas in the Midwest by encouraging college graduates to work in rural schools. The SPT program offers a unique opportunity for individuals who wish to pursue a career as a public-school teacher, as the number of recruitment positions for SPT is much larger than that of the General Teacher Recruitment Examination. Correspondingly, SPT must fulfill the additional requirement of teaching in remote rural areas for three years. Upon completing this period, SPT can be automatically registered as tenured members of the public education system and are able to select a new school to serve. Considering the ongoing pandemic, stability has emerged as a crucial factor influencing the decision-making process for many individuals in the job market. As such, the SPT program has become an appealing option for those who wish to secure a job in the public education system, particularly in the realm of arts subjects, which constitute a smaller fraction of overall teacher recruitment. This significant factor also played a crucial role in Mr. Yang's decision to change his profession in 2020.

The size of rural teaching sites is notably smaller than that of rural elementary schools, which are typically situated in economically underdeveloped areas where transportation is challenging, and the population is sparse. At the Tongli teaching site, there are seven teachers who teach a total of 97 students from 1st to 4th grade across four classes, with each teacher responsible for several subjects. Mr. Yang is tasked with overseeing the music program, teaching math and English, and managing the school's Youth Pioneer Team (a mass youth organization for children aged six to fourteen in China).

The scheduling of music classes at the teaching site is flexible and dependent on teachers' assessment of students' academic workload and energy level. When teachers sense that students are becoming fatigued from their academic studies, they arrange a music class to restore balance.

Typically, there is one music lesson per week for each class. In addition to daily music instruction, the RMT holds theme-based music activities for significant festivals such as Children's Day and New Year's Day and participates in the annual music festival in the township. Furthermore, in remote rural areas, school music activities can be easily exposed to the local community. As Mr. Yang's school is located in the center of the small town, where villagers pass by all day, school activities are very visible to the villagers and have become a common topic of conversation. Additionally, some proactive parents have established a parent committee to provide support for school events and actively share information about current activities on social media platforms. Regarding music equipment, the Xieli teaching site received electronic pianos, bass, and military drums distributed by the Balanced Development of Education². However, due to insufficient allocation, Mr. Yang cannot organize a marching band with the current inventory.

While we discussed the difference between rural and urban music teaching, Mr. Yang stated that he didn't feel a notable discrepancy while transferring to the rural school. His background growing up in a rural area likely contributed to this ease of transition. In comparison to his own rural education experience, the current situation has notably improved, with every rural public school being equipped with air conditioning and multimedia. SPT was provided with living necessities and was respected in the teaching community. Also, his upbringing in a rural setting has given him a deeper understanding and empathy for children from disadvantaged backgrounds, such as "left-behind" children, having encountered many such individuals during his time in the village.

² In 2021, the Ministry of Education launched a program to promote balanced development in compulsory education in counties, with a focus on ensuring adequate teaching facilities for rural schools. As part of this program, efforts were made to improve music education in rural areas, such as the distribution of musical instruments to primary schools in rural areas (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2021).

Building upon the understanding of teachers' contexts and previous experiences discussed above, in the following chapters, I further investigate music teachers' perceptions of the value of music education in national policy and in their community, as well as in the music learning experiences of rural students.

Chapter 5

Data Analysis: Value of Music Education from National Policy to Participants' Schools

In this chapter, I address the first research question: What is the value of music education in rural schools and communities? I analyzed data from the interview transcripts and supported by relevant documents, and identified themes related to two main topics: 1) The value of music education in Chinese society and education, and 2) The value of music education in participants' schools and communities.

Value of Music Education in Chinese Society and Education

National Policy and Standardized Tests

To alleviate excessive academic pressure, promote a more holistic and culturally rich education for students, the Chinese government issued a series of policies in recent years to elevate the status of aesthetic education in the compulsory curriculum. However, the National Standards Tests (NST), which are considered a guide (baton 指挥棒) in Chinese education, still place exclusive emphasis on academic scores and neglect arts-related subjects.

The two most significant NST are Middle School Entrance Examination and High School Entrance Examination (*Gaokao* 高考), which serve as prerequisites for entry into almost all senior high school and college-level institutions. The content of the NST, particularly the *Gaokao*, determines the focus of 12 years of schooling for Chinese students, from elementary to high school, and reflects the values of Chinese society and education. As a result, the lack of representation in the NST has a significant negative impact on the status of music as both a school subject and a social activity (Mao, interview, September 11, 2022). Except in a few professional music schools, music education is undervalued by many school administrators and

parents who (often) believe that music learning cannot help their students gain admission into reputable universities.

The competition arising from educational testing is even more fierce in Henan Province because of the third largest population in China and the few prominent local colleges. *Gaokao* was also considered the most crucial way to help level the inequality between the country's rich and poor (Zhuang, 2017). Rural parents particularly prioritize NST as the sole means for their children to go outside of the villages and become successful, and fiercely emphasize Chinese, Math, and English. "Music is not on their radar" (Mao, Interview, September 23, 2022). This perception further affects students' attitude toward music classes: "Students do not develop sufficient attention to music. They all think that music is a sub-subject that is just for entertainment, so they don't treat music lessons as a priority" (Mao, interview, September 23, 2022). Mrs. Mao expresses her understanding of the vulnerable status of music education in school curricula: "You know. When you put more energy into one aspect, you will have less to care about other aspects" (Interview, September 23, 2022).

In this case, Mrs. Mao believes that if music could be involved in the NST, naturally, it would become highly valued by school stakeholders. Director Mei acknowledges that the weight of a subject in NST determines its value in schools:

It is a relief for schools when music is not required in the Middle School Entrance Examination because they don't need to worry about the quality of instruction. In the Middle School Examination, Chinese, Math, and English have 120 scores each. So, schools will ensure adequate class time for these "main subjects" and then arrange the remaining class time for arts subjects. (Mei, interview, October 4, 2022)

On the other hand, there have been positive changes in recent years. In 2021, the *Guangming Journal*, a state-run publication, published an article titled "Three Questions for Involving Arts Education in Middle School Entrance Examinations," which drew attention to the possibility of including music education in standardized tests (Guo & Wang, 2022). Director Mei reflected that some cities in Henan province had launched trials to incorporate music into the Middle School Entrance Examination. She believes that even though the weighting of music scores in these trials is currently small, schools and parents cannot disregard music classes and must provide formal music lessons (Mei, interview, October 4, 2022). Director Mei further introduced the process and challenges of this trial:

This trial has not been extended to more regions because, in the process of investigation, we found that the implementation is uneven in various regions. Some regions are particularly weak in music education, and the involvement of music education is more of a disadvantage for these regions. So, we need to try a few more years. However, after the [implementation of] Balanced Development of Education in recent years, both the percentage of music classes and music teachers is increasing. The whole environment of music education is improving. (Mei, interview, October 4, 2022)

Participants in this study argue that without music in the NST, parents, teachers, and school administrators will continue to prioritize academic performance. In recent years, the efforts to incorporate music into standardized examinations, alongside the beneficial reforms in policies that support arts education, give music teachers an optimistic outlook on the future of music education in rural schools.

National Education Policy in Ren County and Its Schools

In this part, participants shared their experiences regarding the implementation of national education policies in their schools and in Ren County, which reflects the value of music education in the county and its schools. They pointed out discrepancies in the implementation of policies across different administrative levels and identified significant factors that influence the execution of policies from higher administrative levels, such as county-level, down to the school level. From their discussions, two prominent themes emerged, namely the application of policy into practice and the challenges surrounding the recruitment and retention of rural teachers.

Applying Policy to Practice. In the past few years, the Chinese Central Government issued a series of policies to conduct education reform to reduce students' academic pressure and cultivate holistic people, such as "Opinions on comprehensively strengthening and improving aesthetic education in schools in the new era" and "Double Reduction", which encouraged schools to provide interest-based after-school services (Zhang & Huang, 2022). All participants in this research mentioned the positive impact of these national education policies on music education. Mrs. Wan suggested that the "policy is inclined to favor music and music teachers" (Interview, September 21, 2022). Mr. Yang stated: "The national policy now requires that school curricula should be balanced to nurture capable young people to have all-round moral, intellectual, physical, social, and aesthetic abilities." (Interview, October 16, 2022).

In response to national policies, the Education Bureau in Ren County organized a variety of music activities, such as a music teachers' basic skills competition, a music teaching competition, choral competitions, workshops., and professional development workshops. County Curriculum Director Mei recognizes the significant value of music education and has implemented various measures to elevate the status of local music teachers and cultivate a

supportive and engaged music teacher community. From teachers' perspectives, these efforts have created a sense of belonging among local rural music teachers, leading to improved teacher retention in the field of rural music education (Mei, interview, October 4, 2022). Music teachers and the subject of music have become increasingly active in the county. Mrs. Wan believes this improvement relies on positive national policies:

So why has there been an increase in music activities [at the county level]? It must be due to the guidance of the education policy. The guidance is from top to bottom. It's slowly pushed down from the national to the local level. (Wan, interview, September 24, 2022)

On the contrary, two EXP schools did not witness an increase in their focus on music education. Despite the active efforts of the Ren County Educational Bureau at the administrative level to support music as a school subject, the two EXP schools included in this study did not respond positively to the national policy. Mrs. Wan described the implementation of the national policy in her EXP schools as "formulaic":

Nowadays, we say Double Reduction³ and quality (*suzhi*) education. We often proclaim slogans like that.... In rural schools, although we say that we follow the policy closely, we remain focused on students' academic achievement in "main classes" (non-arts courses). (Wan, interview, September 21, 2022)

Mrs. Mao also reflects on the superficial implementation of the national policy in her school, noting that it fails to bring about meaningful changes to the unbalanced status of music courses. She states that,

Music is more important than courses like labor class. However, it is not as important as Chinese, English, or math. For the current state of education, I feel that the importance of

³ The whole name of this policy is "Opinions on Comprehensive Strengthening and Innovating School Aesthetic Education in the New Era".

music has reached its peak. You can't expect music courses to be as important as academic courses.... Top-tier universities don't take music as an evaluation for enrollment, so the situation of music education is understandable. (Mao, interview, September 11, 2022)

The diverse implementation of national policy from county to school level reveals that, under the “baton” of the NST, music can become important, but only to the extent of a “sub-subject,” a secondary subject to the core curriculum of Mathematics, Chinese, English, Literature and Science subjects. Also, both teachers in the EXP suggested that national policies might be conducted better in urban schools owing to the abundance of resources and well-educated parents who adopt a more holistic approach to their children’s education.

In contrast to the experiences of teachers in the EXP schools, Mr. Yang reports a different set of experiences in the rural context. He suggested a proactive implementation of national education policy: “It’s certain that the school principal would value all-round development of moral, intellectual, physical, social and aesthetic development because they are speaking in accordance with the policy” (Yang, interview, October 16, 2022). Mr. Yang describes a positive teacher collaboration: “All teachers need to assist music activities. I’ll let the teachers rehearse their classes first, and then I’ll review all the shows and give them suggestions” (Yang, interview, October 16, 2022). Additionally, Mr. Yang suggests that his school elevates the status of music education because of its publicity function. “The status of music education has gone from moderate to very high priority because they [principals and teachers] see that organizing music activities has a promotional effect on the entire school” (Yang, interview, October 16, 2022).

There are several potential reasons causing the diverse implementation in EXP and RMT. First, compared to the stable student enrollment in EXP, RMT with small populations are at risk of enrollment loss and school closure. In recent years, the Chinese government has been adjusting the layout of schools by revoking or merging a large number of rural primary and secondary schools and teaching points in order to effectively utilize educational resources (Liu, 2015). As a result, rural remote schools are eager to increase student enrollment in order to sustain the viability of the school. Mr. Yang's principal regards music activities as a constructive opportunity to increase the school's presence in the local community and demonstrate the quality of education to local parents. Another reason, according to Mrs. Wan, is the different academic pressure in the two kinds of schools. EXP schools are experiencing more academic expectations from stakeholders. Every semester, Ren County ranks all EXP primarily based on the academic performance of sixth-grade students (the last year in elementary school in China), which pushes those schools to pursue academic credential achievement. Being the most resourced schools in a township, the rank of EXP schools represents the education quality of the entire township (Wan, interview, September 24, 2022). Nonetheless, RMT experience less academic pressure because most of them do not have fifth and sixth grades; they only participate in assessments at the township level (Wan, interview, September 24, 2022).

With different stances and goals, rural education institutions in Ren County represent a diverse understanding of the value of music education and different responses to national policy. As most music teachers in rural areas are working in EXP, the inconsistent implementation between county and school levels seems a more common experience for general rural music teachers.

Teaching Recruitment and Retention. Director Mei states that only around 30% of rural schools in Ren County have specialized music teachers (Mei, interview, October 4, 2022). The undervaluation of music education is evident in the local recruitment and retention system, which exacerbates the shortage of rural music teachers.

The "Opinions on Formulating Standards for the Establishment of Teaching Staff in Primary and Secondary Schools" issued by the Chinese Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Finance in 2001 stipulated that the teacher-student ratio for rural primary schools should be around 1:23 (Ministry of Education & Ministry of Finance, 2001). However, the recruitment rate for each subject was not specified in the policy and it is left up to the local government to determine the position numbers based on the actual needs of the community. Ren County Government plans and oversees the recruitment of public-school teachers annually (Mei, interview, October 4, 2022). In 2022, Ren County planned to publicly recruit 100 primary school teachers, with a stipulation that they must be under 35 years old and remain at the same school for five years. However, among the 100 positions, only one music teacher was intended to be recruited, which presents a significant underrepresentation of music teachers in the overall teacher recruitment process.

Moreover, Mr. Yang states that, only when the EXP school lacks music teachers, will the local central school administration report to Ren County the need to recruit music teachers in the town. Thus, "It's not that the remote rural schools don't like music teachers, but that the central school [i.e., administration] is not going to assign them." "They [central administration] will not recruit an extra music teacher when they can use this slot to recruit academic teachers" (Yang, interview, October 30, 2022). Then, Director Mei addresses this situation from the perspective of the required teacher-to-student ratio:

In line with the required teacher-to-student ratio, teaching sites [remote rural schools] with small student numbers would not have specific teachers for each subject. So, there will be one teacher for several subjects, which we call the whole subject teacher (Mei, interview, October 4, 2022).

As RMT need to ensure sufficient time for “core subjects,” such as Chinese, math, and English, education authorities typically assign “core subject” teachers to RMT. This way, these teachers can teach their own subjects, as well as arts and physical education classes.

Furthermore, the retention rate of rural music teachers also encounters significant challenges. Due to the general shortage of rural teachers, many new music teachers are required to teach other “main subjects.” “Over time, some of them may give up on music and switch to be “main subjects” specialists instead” (Wan, interview, September 24, 2022). Additionally, in recent years, Ren County has established new urban schools and conducts unified recruitment at the beginning of each semester to fulfill the staffing needs of these schools. Local rural teachers who meet specific criteria, such as years of experience and honors, have the opportunity to apply for transfers to urban areas. They undergo an examination process and are subsequently assigned to urban schools based on their performance. These actions have exacerbated the loss of excellent teachers in rural areas and reflect the priority given by schools and governments to the “main subjects” and urban education (Wan, interview, September 24, 2022).

Teacher Promotion System. The current promotion system for public school teachers in China has been criticized for undervaluing the achievements of arts teachers, which has led to a decline in job satisfaction and a shift towards other subjects. In China, civil servants are promoted based on annual performance evaluations. Promotion to higher levels is accompanied by a significant increase in salary (Karachiwalla & Park, 2016). In elementary and middle school, teachers are typically categorized into four ranks: level 2, level 1, deputy senior level,

and senior level. The evaluation process consists of three main themes: 1) county-level excellent teacher honor, 2) county-level public class, and 3) research project. In Ren County, all new teachers with undergraduate degrees are automatically evaluated as level 2 teachers. After four years, if the teacher meets the three promotion criteria, they can be upgraded to level 1 (Wan, interview, September 24, 2022).

However, since there are no standardized scores for music classes, music teachers often receive low credits in this evaluation system. In addition, the number of excellent teacher honors is limited, and principals always tend to give priority to “main subject” teachers. For example, in Mrs. Wan’s school, there are only two quotas every year and just six in the entire township. Thus, it is almost impossible for music teachers to compete in the excellent teacher honor with “main subject” teachers who have standardized scores (Wan, interview, September 24, 2022).

As the first level 1 teacher in the arts teacher team at her school, Mrs. Wan discusses her challenging journey towards promotion. As a county’s publicity specialist, Mrs. Wan did many activity reports in addition to daily music teaching activities: “Those two years were very tiring. I did more than 100 reports [for county activities]. And as I’m not a journalism major, I didn’t know how to write these reports at first. Director Mei taught me step by step and helped me edit.” (Wan, interview, September 21, 2022). However, even though she did much work for her school and county, her application for excellent teacher honor was rejected immediately by the principal. Mrs. Wan describes that “Although he [the principal] didn’t say it explicitly, I knew that his meaning was that arts teachers are not qualified to get this honor” (Wan, interview, September 21, 2022). Mrs. Wan felt very upset: “I taught every day, organized various activities, and undertook publicity tasks. My principal denied this possibility with just a few words” (Wan, interview, September 21, 2022). In the end, it was Director Mei led a discussion with all

principals, and together they decided to nominate her for the honor from the central administration.

Thus, the current promotion system is not favorable to music teachers. While music teachers can fulfill other requirements by working hard, the recognition of an excellent teacher cannot be achieved through effort alone. Additionally, the school credit system in Ren County values teachers' achievements differently depending on their subject areas. For instance, "major subject" teachers receive more credits for earning a town-level honor compared to music teachers who win a county-level honor. (Wan, interview, September 24, 2022). As a result, the promotion system often leads to music teachers seeking job changes in order to pursue better promotion opportunities.

Music Education in the National Arts Curriculum

In addition to music policy, the National Arts Curriculum Standard is another significant factor that influences the development of rural music education. In 2022, the Ministry of Education published Arts Curriculum Standard of Full-time Compulsory Schooling (2022 Version). The new curriculum reformed the contents of arts education: grades 1-7 are based on music and fine art, incorporating dance, drama and opera, and film and television (including digital media arts); in grades 8-9, the arts become an elective class, where students can select two or more arts classes from five subject areas—music, fine art, dance, drama and opera, film and television. Hu Zhifeng, head of the Ministry of Education's Compulsory Education Arts Curriculum Standards Revision team, said that the core change in this curriculum reform is that the educational philosophy has shifted from educating knowledge to educating people (Li, 2023). Sun Xiaohua, a famous Teochew Opera actor, suggested that the integration of disciplines is an important exploration of arts curriculum reform, which aims to enhance students' comprehensive

aesthetic education and make arts education more “three-dimensional and perceptible” (Li, 2023).

When asked about music in the new curriculum, Mrs. Wan's response aligns with the points, emphasizing the value of music education in nurturing well-rounded individuals:

Music education is not simply about cultivating students' musical abilities; it has risen to the level of cultivating people. In addition to basic music skills, music educators should promote students' physical and mental health and develop their civic responsibility through music teaching. I think this elevates arts education to a very high position, and it [the ideas in the standard] should make a great difference in the music classroom in the future. (Wan, interview, September 24, 2022)

She believes that the inclusion of new arts subjects—dance, drama and opera, film and television—will become music teachers’ responsibilities in primary schools. Mrs. Wan admitted that this comprehensive curriculum results in unprecedented challenges for music teachers because “many contents, such as film, television, and drama, teachers hadn’t learned in school. We are also blank in these areas” (interview, September 24, 2022). So, it may be a long process for teachers to collect related materials and figure out appropriate teaching materials. Correspondingly, the new curriculum requires local educational bureaus to conduct regular lectures and training to help all arts teachers understand and apply the new arts curriculum. In the music education workshop in Ren County, Director Mei has led several teacher seminars studying the new arts curriculum. Mrs. Wan describes:

In the first six months of this year (2022), Director Mei has been leading two seminars for music teachers to read through the ACSR. It informed music teachers of the challenges ahead because music classes are not only about singing but covering broad

fields. Director Mei also said there is no rush and encouraged music teachers to settle down to study the standard carefully. (Wan, interview, September 24, 2022)

The learning seminar will be held once a week and each teacher will lead a discussion for one chapter (Wan, interview, September 24, 2022). The new curriculum assigns a significant role to music education in fostering a holistic individual and sets higher expectations for music teachers. Mrs. Wan noted that this comprehensive arts curriculum requires music teachers' consistent learning.

Value of Music Education in Participants' Schools and Communities

In this section, I discuss the participants' viewpoints regarding the value of music education within their school communities. I begin by presenting their individual beliefs about the value of music education, and subsequently, I include the perspectives of other stakeholders, including county administrators, school principals, colleagues, and members of the local school community.

Music Teachers

In Mr. Yang's RMT setting, the music program is pivotal in enhancing the school's influence within the local community. He states that because of the limited music resources, if the teacher can organize high-quality performances in the RMT, they will become noteworthy and leave a great impression on the local villagers. Mr. Yang also utilizes online platforms like Tiktok and WeChat to facilitate the dissemination of performance recordings. In this way, even the parents of "left-behind" children working outside of villages can access their children's music activities. The number of "likes" and "shares" serve as indicators of performance popularity and are taken as feedback to music teachers (Yang, interview, October 30, 2022). The music program is crucial for the reputation and student enrollment of the RMT.

Mrs. Wan highlights that while academic scores are the primary factor for the ranking of EXP schools in Ren County, the performance of music program also contributes to the schools' ranking through the evaluation of the overall accolades. For instance, this year, her school climbed from the bottom third to sixth place in the county ranking, not due to an improvement in academic performance, but because of their achievements in the arts. "Academic teachers in any school are very hard-working. The improvement mainly relied on our artistic performance, such as the art and choral competitions. They contributed to extra credits and a higher rank for the school" (Wan, interview, September 21, 2022).

However, Mrs. Mao holds a more pessimistic view about the value of music education in school. She used "chicken-rib" 鸡肋 to indicate the role of the music program in the school, which means that "music education is an essential part of the educational system, but it's not part of the main subjects. It is both essential and dispensable. It doesn't get much attention in the daily teaching" (Mao, interview, September 11, 2022).

To conclude, Mr. Yang and Mrs. Wan have advocated for a more positive view of the importance of music education in schools, including increasing support for RMT and improving the rankings for EXP. However, Mrs. Mao questions the value of music in her school, stating that while it is technically a compulsory subject, it is not truly appreciated.

The County Administrator

Reflected by teachers, county administrators are generally supportive of music programs in school because their responsibility is to implement national policies. In Ren County, one significant reason for the apparent development of music education is the concerted efforts of Director Mei, who currently serves as a curriculum director in the County Teaching and Research Office and previously worked as a music teacher herself. Mrs. Wan perceives that the

true advancement of music education in the county commenced with the appointment of Director Mei in the county office in 2018. During a lecture for all music teachers in Ren County, Director Mei said, “I come from a music background, but I think our county's music teachers don't have enough activities to remain active. This is my responsibility. I haven't provided a good platform for everyone. In the future, I am committed to creating more opportunities for everyone” (Wan, interview, September 24, 2022). Since then, music was gradually developed as a subject in Ren County.

Director Mei in Ren County actively promotes various music activities. One initiative includes organizing music teaching research and selecting high-quality music lessons at the township level. These selected teachers then participate in the county-level high-quality lesson competition, which has led to the emergence of exceptional courses. Additionally, the Basic Skills Competition for music teachers has been held annually, covering various activities such as piano, dance, and conducting, which are essential skills for general music teaching. Director Mei also established a music teacher workshop that conducts teaching seminars, lectures, public classes, and music skill demonstrations. These activities have a radiating impact on training young local music teachers. Mrs. Wan responded that such initiatives elevated music teachers' status in schools: “Previously, few people in the school say that music teachers teach well, as there is no platform for them to demonstrate their abilities. But now it is different. You can see that music teachers have received county- and city-level awards” (Wan, interview, September 24, 2022). Some awards can also earn credits for music teachers, which further contributes to their evaluation and promotions.

As a previous music teacher, Director Mei's rich music teaching experiences from elementary to high school contribute to her understanding of this subject and music teachers. She

believes that music subject is one of the most important ones in China because this is one of the few subjects that begins in kindergarten. However, some rural principals may not realize the importance of music education and assign music teachers to other subjects. Director Wei emphasizes that one of the main objectives of organizing activities for music teachers is to support them in preserving their foundational music skills and fostering a sense of community among them. For future development, Mrs. Wei intends to establish an online collection of music teaching resources that can be accessed by a wide range of rural music teachers, especially new teachers. She is also working on exploring the concept of “big music,” seeking to integrate music learning into students’ daily lives. With the support of policies and the attention of local administrators, Ren County's music education is relatively prominent in the whole city (Mei, interview, October 4, 2022).

School Principals

In the Chinese public school system, while principals are expected to comply with overarching policies, they also have the autonomy to implement policies that best suit their individual schools' unique circumstances. Therefore, the value that principals place on music education is crucial to the development of discipline and the attitudes of the school community towards music classes and music teachers. Director Mei suggests that “We can also say that a good principal is a good school” (Mei, interview, October 4, 2022). She notes that several principals in Ren County place particular emphasis on music programs and organize various music clubs, which results in their schools being noticeably vibrant. Director Mei believes that “the value of music has always been there; it’s just a matter of whether the principals can admit it and conduct this subject properly” (Mei, interview, October 4, 2022). “For some far-sighted principals, they take physical and aesthetic subjects very seriously. They maintain enough arts

teachers and arrange [enough arts] classes” (Mei, interview, October 4, 2022). From Director Mei’s views, the principals’ belief in music education determines the implementation of music programs in school.

Music Teachers Wear Multiple Hats. In both EXP and RMT, music teachers take on a wide range of school responsibilities and assist with all school activities. In the EXP school, Mrs. Wan mentioned that music teachers often have additional responsibilities, such as guiding the youth pioneer team and serving as student counselors. This is because the principal perceives teaching music as easy and less demanding compared to other subjects that are subject to testing pressures. (Wan, interview, September 21, 2022). Music teachers are forced to be an “all-rounder.” Also, the various additional tasks assigned to music teachers leave them with limited time to enhance their musical abilities and participate in county-level activities. In Mrs. Mao’s school, the endless paperwork required by higher authorities drains her energy for music teaching. Furthermore, due to the overall shortage of teachers in rural areas, it is common to assign music teachers to other subjects, causing some to completely abandon music and switch to "main subjects". In the case of Mr. Yu's rural school, he is currently teaching math, English, and music, and acknowledges that music is not his primary focus. Mrs. Wan also admitted that “Sometimes, I think it’s good enough for a music teacher to primarily teach music because many music teachers have changed their position to "main" subjects” (Wan, interview, September 21, 2022).

Music Teachers’ Experiences in Rural Experimental Schools (EXP). In rural EXP schools, Mrs. Wan and Mrs. Mao report that music as a subject is undervalued by their principals. Due to the absence of standardized assessments in music, principals often disregarded the efforts and achievements of music teachers. Despite teaching 16 classes a week and fulfilling

additional school responsibilities, Mrs. Wan is still perceived by her principal as having a leisurely workload. Mrs. Mao's principal also considers music teaching to be easy since students do not have to pass any music exams. Although teaching over 20 classes per week, including extra Chinese opera classes without additional compensation, Mrs. Mao's workload is not acknowledged by the principal. She states that "music teachers have to put in more effort than other teachers to achieve success," which diminishes their job satisfaction (Mao, interview, September 11, 2022).

Mrs. Wan challenges the perspective of EXP principals reflected in the statement: "This is what you [music teachers] should do for schools because you don't have a contribution in terms of students' performance" (Wan, interview, September 21, 2022). She argues that "there is no sense saying music teachers don't have the contribution" (Wan, interview, September 21, 2022) and cites her choir's achievement which contributed to more credits and a higher ranking for EXP schools in the county. This second prize is particularly valuable for a rural school because it is challenging for rural schools to compete with urban schools that possess better resources. Mrs. Wan highlights the extra effort that both she and her students put in to rehearse for the competition. "We sacrifice our rest time to rehearse students for the choral competition. We don't take a break at noon, and we work overtime in the afternoon" (Wan, interview, September 21, 2022). Mrs. Wan wanted to show her professionalism and prove the value of the music program in school by performing well on a large stage and winning approval from the school personnel and the community. Thus, when they got the second prize in the competition, Mrs. Wan "felt that all the hard work was worth it" (Wan, interview, September 21, 2022).

However, Mrs. Wan expresses her disappointment at the principal's lack of acknowledgment of her and her students' hard work. Despite their excellent performance, her

principal “did not say anything and did not give more consideration when evaluating the merits of her work and promotion of the school?” (Wan, interview, September 21, 2022). Mrs. Wan believes that music teachers put in just as much effort as “main subjects” teachers but are unfairly disadvantaged and subject to prejudice. While she recognizes that reversing this trend may be difficult, Wang finds consolation in thinking about her colleagues in rural schools: “Maybe the environment is generally like this, and every teacher has experienced this kind of a hard time” (Wan, interview, September 21, 2022).

This is just one example Mrs. Wan shared with me about the unfair treatment of music/arts teachers. She characterized it as “such a helpless situation for arts teachers.” This scores-based evaluation system negatively affects music teachers’ sense of happiness and self-esteem while simultaneously demanding their commitment. Even though music teachers do not have salary compensation and have fewer promotion opportunities, they are still expected to not only perform their compulsory teaching duty well but also provide services to the entire school (Wan, interview, September 21, 2022).

A Music Teacher’s Experiences in a Rural Remote School (RMT). With several years of organizational experience, Mr. Yang oversees all the school activities and provides advice to the principal on event planning. As the only special position teacher (SPT) and music teacher in the RMT, Mr. Yang was supported by his school principal. The small population of this RMT fosters close relationships between teachers and between teachers and the principal. The scarcity of teachers makes the principal value all of them. Specifically, “the school is very good for SPT, whether you are in music or other subjects” (Yang, interview, October 16, 2022). After all, according to the SPT contract, Mr. Yang is likely to serve in this school for only three years before transferring to other schools with better resources. “You are the new blood for the school

and can bring [positive] change to them” (Yang, interview, October 16, 2022). The apparent change that Mr. Yang brings to the RMT is the increasingly qualified and diverse music events, which have facilitated the vitality of the school and enhanced its reputation in the local community. As an RMT, the publicity of school activities is crucial for increasing student enrollment, which is a key priority for the principal and the entire school.

In summary, the attitudes of school principals towards music education are significant in shaping the experiences of music teachers and the growth of the music program within the school. These attitudes can be influenced by factors such as academic pressure, student and teacher numbers, and the perceived practical use of music in the school. In an EXP that prioritizes exam results, music teachers and programs were considered unimportant. However, in rural schools that prioritize student enrollment, music activities were highly valued for their promotional value. Nevertheless, a forward-thinking principal should always prioritize the development of music education to cultivate the long-term development of their students.

Colleagues

The Benefit of Closer Relationships. In this research, all participants suggest a more genuine and rustic relationship with their colleagues. As three teachers grew up in rural areas and are working in schools near their hometowns, they have an emotional and geological connection with their colleagues, particularly Mrs. Mao and Mrs. Wan, who have been working in their schools for more than eight years. Mrs. Mao highlighted that the unique bond among rural teachers is rare to find in other workplaces and see it as an important reason to teach in the rural school. Mrs. Wan also acknowledges that rural teachers from the same town tend to maintain connections with each other, even if they do not work in the same school, indicating a deeper connection to the community and the land. In Mr. Yang’s RMT, even though he did not work

with his colleagues for a long time, he still feels a strong sense of intimacy with them. In his small rural school, colleagues are willing to assist each other, and everyone participates in music activities, which further helps Mr. Yang organize activities.

The Problem of Time Conflicts. However, if there are time conflicts between music rehearsals and other subjects, colleagues are often unwilling to support the rehearsal. Mrs. Wan says:

In my school, both principals and teachers focus on academic scores. Many teachers thought rehearsals would compress the time of students' academic learning and didn't support the contest. Only a few teachers believe that little kids shouldn't merely focus on academic study and need a well-rounded education. (Wan, interview, September 21, 2022)

In an environment that emphasizes academic performance, the rehearsal for music events is seen as a disturbance by many teachers to students' academic study. As teachers didn't reach a consensus on it, sometimes students are caught in the middle and feel aggrieved. For example, class tutors may blame students for going to choir and "conclude that their academic learning has been interfered with by rehearsals". "The students always felt quite aggrieved, and sometimes they cried as they still wanted to participate in the choir" (Wan, interview, September 21, 2022). In this case, music teachers have to utilize their lunch time, recess time, and even after-school hours for rehearsals to avoid conflicts with their other classes. However, Mrs. Wan perceives this situation not as a conflict but rather as a lack of consensus between classes and music rehearsals. She believes that her colleagues do not intend to diminish the value of music education but are compelled to prioritize students' academic scores, as examination scores serve as the primary assessment criteria for Chinese, Math, and English teachers in EXP schools.

Interpersonal and Professional Skills. Mr. Yang believes that the attitude of colleagues and principals toward music teachers and music programs is related to the teachers' professional and interpersonal abilities. At his school, all teachers are experienced and have taught for 20 or 30 years. Thus, "When you are new to a school, few people will care about you and value you at the beginning". New teachers "must be competent enough in a certain area to have a voice in the school" (Yang, interview, October 30, 2022). In the RMT, Mr. Yang's adept organization and meticulous planning have earned him the respect of his colleagues and the principal. Typically, Mr. Yang would let each class rehearse first and then review all the performances and provide feedback. All teachers and the principal will follow his arrangement.

When asked about the difference in his previous experiences in private schools, Mr. Yang emphasized the importance of his personal aptitude for handling people: "If you're not good at it, people will not treat you well anywhere you go. As a new teacher, who wouldn't like you if you take more responsibilities? It's all about interpersonal skills rather than where you go" (Yang, interview, October 30, 2022). He also acknowledges that "the unique advantage [in the RMT] is the smaller number of students which makes it easier to organize and rehearse performances more effectively. All teachers can be easily involved" (Yang, interview, October 30, 2022). Mr. Yang felt that the collective power in his school is greater, leading to easier management of the entire show.

To summarize, rural teachers often share a closer bond with each other as a result of their shared geographic location. However, when scheduling conflicts arise between core academic classes and music rehearsals, most "main subject" teachers are not supportive for the rehearsal. On the other hand, Mr. Yang describes a more positive music engagement in his RMT. He

earned the trust and support of his colleague by organizing school activities well and involving them in preparing music activities together.

Local School Community Members

Mr. Yang highlights the increased interactions in the RMT between teachers and the local community, including students' families and local villagers. In contrast, the teachers in the two boarding EXP schools do not mention extensive collaborations with the school community. This disparity may be attributed to the larger size of the boarding schools, which can make it challenging for families to actively participate in school events and activities.

According to Mr. Yang, “As the local villagers live around the area, the school's music events are like local events that most villagers know about” (Yang, interview, October 16, 2022). While most activities in the schools are primarily organized within the school premises, only a select number of students' guardians are invited to attend specific events. However, recordings of these activities are quickly disseminated online throughout the community. This results in a positive impression of the school among the locals, and parents will be pleased to see their kids in these videos. Mr. Yang believed that “music can enrich the school culture, especially those activities related to traditional culture.” Furthermore, in this small town, the local people have a high regard for music teachers, and parents are enthusiastic about assisting with school events. “The local villagers have more respect for the music teachers because they feel that music teachers are versatile” (Yang, interview, October 30, 2022). Mr. Yang's school has a parents' committee to help with teachers' work: “During performances, the parents are responsible for taking videos and photos and then sharing them on their social media or sending them to chat groups for the parents who are unable to attend” (Yang, interview, October 30, 2022).

In contrast to RMT, Mrs. Mao addressed the tense relationship between teachers and students' guardians. Since she has a large number of students whose guardians are grandparents, she feels it is difficult to communicate with grandparents and involve them in students' after-school tasks. "Grandparents will say they don't know how to educate, and it's all the teacher's responsibility when the child is at school. There is a lot of this taken-for-granted thinking. They won't go along with teachers." Some grandparents are not even respectful enough of music teachers and may blame teachers when they believe the teachers have done something improper.

The study identifies two distinct types of schools with differing levels of collaboration with the local community. In small towns, there is a closer relationship between the school and parents, fostering stronger communication and engagement. However, in Mrs. Mao's EXP boarding school, communication with older guardians is challenging, resulting in a weaker school-community relationship.

Chapter Summary

This chapter explored the significance of music education at the national, county, and school levels, revealing a dynamic among them within the educational system. At the national and county levels, there is a notable elevation of music as aesthetic education with the positive policy implementation, resulting in improved experiences for music teachers and a stronger sense of community. However, at the school level, the unchanging score-focused assessment system leads to principals and parents prioritizing academic subjects and neglecting music education. This issue is particularly prominent in EXP schools that primarily cater to higher-grade elementary students, leading to a diminished appreciation for music education and reduced job satisfaction among music teachers. In contrast, in RMT schools, the music program holds a

higher status as it serves the enrollment function and meets the expectations of the local community.

Chapter 6

Data Analysis: Students and Their Music Learning Experiences

I now address the second research question: How do participants describe students and their music learning experiences? I present the individual teacher's perspectives on their students' backgrounds, students' learning experiences, teaching approaches, and the value of music education for rural students. All three teachers grew up in rural areas in Ren County which they believe helps them better serve rural students and understand students' living environment and learning experiences.

Mrs. Wan at Tan Town Experimental Elementary School (EXP)

Students' Background

Tan Town Experimental Elementary School is a boarding school that admits students in grades three through six. Students beyond third grade, typically around ten years old, are required to reside at the school during the week and return home once a week. The majority of the students, approximately 70% to 80%, are "left-behind" children (Wan, interview, September 21, 2022). The school accommodates a substantial student population of 870 students across 14 classes from third to sixth grade, with class sizes typically reaching up to 60 students. Upon seeing such young kids who live and care for themselves at the school, Mrs. Wan expresses her sympathy toward her young students,

I can feel how tough it is for these kids. When I think about my own childhood, I didn't start residing at school until high school. You can see these fourth graders, such little kids, have to get up at five in the morning, wash up and eat independently. It's really not easy. (Wan, interview, September 21, 2022)

Mrs. Wan's school has morning and evening study, requiring an extensive learning schedule that spans over 12 hours, from as early as 6 am to 8 pm. The excessive academic pressure imposed on students creates additional challenges when it comes to family separation. Mrs. Wan describes that at the beginning of the semester, even sixth-grade students would cry, scream, and occasionally feign illness to get their parents to pick them up. She feels that the experience of leaving the family at an early age and residing in a boarding school potentially diminishes rural students' self-assurance (Wan, interview, September 21, 2022).

During Mrs. Wan's visit to music classes in urban schools, she observed that urban students displayed greater confidence and exhibited superior musical abilities when compared to their rural counterparts. Due to the more comprehensive music resources in urban areas, it is common for urban students to participate in after-school music classes and concerts, such as piano and dance lessons, and few of them can display a higher proficiency in specific instruments. In contrast, rural areas lack such music opportunities, and many parents in these areas do not recognize the value of music education. Recognizing these disparities, Mrs. Wan is motivated to enhance the music education of her rural students while fostering their confidence. By doing so, she wants to narrow the gap between rural and urban students in terms of music education.

Students' Learning Experiences

Mrs. Wan highlights students' lack of retention in learning music theory due to their lack of foundation and seriousness towards the subject. Prior to attending the EXP schools, students may not have received formal education in music knowledge in their local rural schools. Thus, Mrs. Wan intends to "teach basic musical elements to open the door to music" (Wan, interview, September 21, 2022). However, students forget music knowledge quickly. "They learned and

understood in the first class and forgot everything in the next class” (Wan, interview, September 21, 2022). She asked her students: “You can memorize sophisticated contents in Chinese and English. Why can’t you remember the seven notes in music?” (Wan, interview, September 21, 2022). Mrs. Wan explains that many students perceive music lessons as purely for entertainment and do not think they need to take notes and memorize any knowledge.

Preference for Popular Music. In Mrs. Wan’s descriptions, although her students do not have a strong foundation in school music, they are exposed to various genres of music online on Tiktok and other apps. The popular trends significantly impact students’ responses to school music. Her students, especially in upper grades, are not interested in textbook songs and think they are outdated and childish. Mrs. Wan says, “When I play the most popular music at that time, even the third graders can sing. I said, you guys are so smart. Some pop songs are so difficult. You can learn it without teachers” (Wan, interview, September 21, 2022). Mrs. Wan knows that they learn fast because they truly love these songs. On the other hand, Mrs. Wan still approves of the value of music in the textbook and convinces students that “the textbook was developed by many experts, and it must be in line with your psychology and acceptance ability” (Wan, interview, September 21, 2022). She suggests that the music featured in the textbook represents various styles from both domestic and international sources, providing students with a broadened perspective on different genres of music.

As students are very excited to sing pop songs, Mrs. Wan takes learning pop music as a reward for students when they learn the textbook songs well. Also, each grade has different dispositions. For sixth-grade students, they develop their own thinking and tastes and lose interest in songs in the textbook. For third to fifth grades, although they love popular music, they are also willing to follow teachers’ guidance and still have fun in the music classes. “As long as

music teachers guide them well, they are able to engage in the music class with great concentration” (Wan, interview, September 21, 2022).

Classroom Space and Management. In rural schools, music classes are typically held in regular classrooms due to the absence of dedicated music classrooms and facilities. Mrs. Wan suggests that “In some big cities and good schools, they have specific music classrooms with a larger space and classroom instruments which allow students to do more activities. However, this is unattainable in our rural schools” (Wan, interview, September 21, 2022). In Mrs. Wan’s school, each classroom accommodates approximately 60 students, with the desks neatly arranged facing the blackboard. Due to the substantial student population, the classroom is often crowded, allowing little space for students to execute large movements. In this case, the limited teaching spaces pose a hindrance when teachers wish to implement a comprehensive range of music activities. For instance, it was challenging to execute Orff’s rhythmic movements in the classroom. Moreover, due to the absence of outdoor sound equipment, moving outside to facilitate such activities is also challenging. Consequently, the limited teaching space has constrained the format of music classes – there are fewer large-scale activities and games, and more stationary activities such as rhythm exercises, singing practice, and knowledge learning.

Another challenge brought by the large class size is classroom management. Mrs. Wan states that “Although I want to encourage students to express music actively, sometimes it can easily turn into a class where students get so excited that they can’t calm down for the rest of the period.” This is a reality in Chinese public education. With 60 students in one class, how maintaining classroom order is the priority for ensuring class quality. In sum, even if Mrs. Wan wants to encourage students to express themselves freely, she is apprehensive about the constraints of limited space and classroom management.

Teaching Approach

Patience and Love. Mrs. Wan described her students as “very cute and simple” and “very different from one another.” Mrs. Wan enjoyed the time spent with these children and intended to provide them with a relaxed and humorous atmosphere. “I’m not a very serious teacher in the classroom. I like to joke with the students.... I want everyone to feel relaxed and happy in my class while maintaining classroom order” (Wan, interview, September 24, 2022). Mrs. Wan expressed her love and care for the large number of “left-behind” children in her school. “In rural areas, the living conditions and learning environments are very poor, so I would like to give them more love in music class” (Wan, interview, September 24, 2022). She pointed out that rural music teachers must have more patience with their students, as they often require “slow and repetitive explanations of the same concepts due to their slower receptivity” (Wan, interview, September 24, 2022).

The Pacing of Instruction. In order to narrow the gap between rural students and their urban counterparts, Mrs. Wan committed to systematically incorporating music knowledge into her classroom instruction. She spoke to her students, “In the future, I won’t let you feel so different from the urban kids” (Wan, interview, September 21, 2022). Her efforts made a positive difference in her choir. After two months of training, her choir won second prize in the county chorus competition in 2021, outperforming several urban schools. Mrs. Wan expressed her immense pride in her students’ achievements: “It was awesome that the students could be improved from blank canvases to second place in the county. It’s really not easy for rural kids” (Wan, interview, September 21, 2022).

However, Mrs. Wan now faces a contradiction. On the one hand, she wants to impart knowledge and ensure that her students receive more music knowledge: “I always want to give

them more in those forty minutes because rural children usually do not have much access to music knowledge in their daily life” (Wan, interview, September 21, 2022). On the other hand, she recognizes the importance of providing her students with enough space and time to absorb and internalize the knowledge themselves: “The new curriculum standard and various policies are asking teachers not to fill the entire class period, but to leave students space for independent thinking and learning” (Wan, interview, September 21, 2022). Consequently, Mrs. Wan is consistently reflecting on her teaching method and evaluating whether her approach can stimulate students’ independent study. She acknowledges that this is an ongoing process, and she may seek ideas from other teachers to find a balance.

Focus on Music Theory. Then, Mrs. Wan proposes two challenges in teaching basic music theory in rural schools. The first arises from the varying learning speeds of students. She describes, “Some students were able to provide quick responses, but many felt like they were learning a subject as challenging as astronomy” (Wan, interview, September 21, 2022). The second difficulty stems from the “abstract and untouchable” nature of music knowledge. Mrs. Wan suggests that “music concepts, such as pitch, require a lot of imagination” (Wan, interview, September 21, 2022). To address these challenges, Mrs. Wan employs a method of visualizing abstract music concepts. For instance, when teaching musical intervals, she physically stands her electronic piano up in her arms to demonstrate the relationship between the black and white keys, as well as to illustrate concepts such as accidentals, half notes, and whole notes to facilitate their understanding of musical intervals. However, sometimes, it is still insufficient to convey certain concepts to all students. To make the points clearer, Mrs. Wan would involve three student volunteers to stand in a row with the first and third students representing the notes Do and Re,

respectively, and the middle student serving as the black key. Mrs. Wan uses this approach to teach whole tones and semitones (Wan, interview, September 21, 2022).

She acknowledges that she does not expect all students to understand and if two-thirds of the students can understand, then it could be considered a successful class. Due to the varying music foundations and the relatively abstract nature of music theories, it is difficult to engage every student and ensure their success in comprehending the subject matter.

Value of Music Education for Rural Students

Based on eight years of general music teaching experiences, Mrs. Wan presents three significant values of music education for rural students: 1) Reduce academic stresses, 2) Broaden their horizons, and 3) Develop future musicians and music educators.

Reduce Academic Stress. Chinese students have been facing a significant amount of academic pressure for a long time. A vital goal of music education is to relieve students' academic burdens and replenish their energy for academic study. In Mrs. Wan's boarding school, students live in school and take care of themselves from grade three onward, because "The students stay at school from 6 am to 8 pm except for the 20 minutes they have lunch. They hardly have much time to relax and have fun" (Wan, interview, September 21, 2022).

Under such a heavy workload, music teachers want to create a relaxed and fun environment in music classes. Mrs. Wan said, "I try to give the students as much freedom as possible in music class and let them feel happy and relaxed" (Wan, interview, September 24, 2022). After completing the songs in the textbook, she plays popular music that students are interested in. Mrs. Wan feels sympathy for her students' hard work in school, but she also feels that as a music teacher, "that's all I can do right now" (Wan, interview, September 24, 2022).

Broaden Students' Horizons. In Ren County, Online Specific Delivery Classes is a key initiative of the county government, which brings qualified music lessons to every RMT, transcending the geographical barrier and alleviating the imbalance in music education resources. In 2019, the Education Bureau of Ren County invested 150 million RMB in networked electronic whiteboards for online education, covering over 2,000 classrooms in the county. They have built live-streaming classrooms in the EXP primary schools to provide simultaneous online classes for RMT students who lack arts specialists.

Mrs. Wan was assigned to pilot the Special Delivery Music Classes project and provide feedback on the online teaching system. After a period of pilot, Mrs. Wan shared that during her visits to administer tests at some RMT, students excitedly gathered around her and told her they had seen her on TV and sang the songs she taught in class. “When I saw these students, I felt that our online music classes work for them; after all, they can remember the music teacher and the songs they learned in the online music classes” (Wan, interview, September 21, 2022). During the live music classes, she found that “[students] were very interested in the instruments in the video, such as the erhu and horse-head zither, because they had never seen them before” (Wan, interview, September 21, 2022). This experience prompted Mrs. Wan to reflect on the ultimate goal of the online classes:

We admitted that we could not train our students to be professional in music through only two music lessons per week. For the young children, we hope to expose them to more formal music lessons and then gradually develop their interest in music and enrich their lives. By the time they get to junior or high school, they won't be talking about music lessons [just] as singing lessons. We hope to make students feel that music class is not

very far from me — I can see the music teacher in the regular classroom, and the teacher can interact with me. (Wan, interview, September 21, 2022)

Compared to developing musical proficiency, the primary goal of the online delivery class is more about broadening students' horizons and allowing them to experience a formal music class. Wang expresses her long-term expectation for holding online Special Delivery Music Classes, stating: “We hope to make students feel that ‘music class is not very far from me — I can see the music teacher in the regular classroom, and the teacher can interact with me’” (Wan, interview, September 21, 2022). By doing this, she can foster a closer connection between these kids and music, thereby positively influencing their attitudes toward music in the future.

Develop Future Musicians and Music Educators. Mrs. Wan finds great satisfaction in hearing that her former students have pursued music professionally, and she describes this as the power of heritage. She shares the story of a timid student in her choir with a beautiful voice. “Every time I saw her, it was like seeing myself because I was also timid and shy before. So, I kept encouraging her and praised her singing and hoped she can use her talent and become confident.” Now, she has decided to take music as a profession in college. Mrs. Wan felt accomplishment when she heard this news:

Through my efforts, my student can develop her strength and attempt music as a profession, and maybe she will become a music teacher in the future. My attitude toward her may be the same attitude my professor had toward me when I was an undergraduate. (Wan, interview, September 21, 2022)

Several students were graduates of Mrs. Wan’s choir. Thus, music groups provide selected students with more attention and performance opportunities, enabling them to develop

their musical potential. This exposure to music helps identify and nurture students' future musical talent.

In sum, Mrs. Wan's students enjoy music classes, but they do not view them as formal classes in which they must acquire knowledge. Instead, they want to have fun and learn more popular music. Mrs. Wan understands the need for students to relax under intensive academic pressure. She wants to make students feel relaxed and happy, but she also wants to narrow the gap between her students and their urban peers by teaching music literacy. As a result, she is exploring how to strike a balance between imparting knowledge and providing more freedom to her students. She intends to make abstract music concepts tangible and accessible to all her rural students.

Mrs. Mao at Xieli Town Experimental Elementary School (EXP)

Students' Background

Xieli Town Experimental Elementary School, a boarding school with a student population of over 1000, requires all students to reside on campus and permits them to return home once a week from third to sixth grade. Students' daily routine starts in the morning at 6 am, with students in grades three to five ending their classes at 7:50 pm, and those in grade six finishing at 8:40 pm. During their demanding school day, students primarily engage in classroom-based learning activities. The school has a typical class size of 60 students, and as there is no designated music classroom, Mrs. Mao also carries her electronic piano to each classroom.

Regarding students' economic situations, Mrs. Mao states that her rural students typically do not have favorable economics because "if the family had better financial status, the parents would enroll students in urban schools" (Mao, interview, September 11, 2022). There are more

than 70% of students are “left-behind” children and most guardians are grandparents. However, Mrs. Mao reflects that the grandparents are not good at supporting their children’s studies: “The overall academic literacy of these students will be a little bit poorer because their guardians don't pay much attention to education and just want to leave their kids at school for teachers to educate” (Mao, interview, September 11, 2022).

Mrs. Mao echoes Mrs. Wan’s observations on the disparity in music education between rural and urban areas. She asserts that urban students are exposed to a diverse array of extracurricular music classes, which leads to greater musical proficiency compared to their rural peers and reduces the workload of school music teachers. In contrast, in rural regions, the music environment is underdeveloped both inside and outside of schools: “There are fewer out-of-school institutions, so basically how much the students know depends on how much the school teachers teach” (Mao, interview, September 11, 2022). Consequently, the lack of exposure to music requires rural music teachers to allocate extra time to train students for county music events. When asked if there is any unique music culture in rural areas, Mrs. Mao described her township regularly inviting troupes to perform Henan Opera. However, most audiences are elders, and young children are simply tagging along without appreciating these traditional music genres (Mao, interview, September 23, 2022). Thus, she believes that her students have few interactions with music outside of school.

Additionally, the postponement of music education leads to an inadequate musical foundation among rural students. Mrs. Mao illustrates that prior to enrolling at Xieli EXP school in third grade, many of her students have not had music classes in their local rural schools, owing to the small population and the scarcity of teachers. However, she also positively states that after a period of learning, students’ music abilities can be obviously improved because “compared to Chinese, math and

English classes, the students prefer music classes because they can sing and play without the academic burden” (Mao, interview, September 11, 2022).

Students’ Learning Experiences

Mrs. Mao first discussed students’ attitudes toward music classes in rural schools. She observes that many “left-behind” children who were raised by their grandparents may be more rebellious and disobedient. Furthermore, as many rural guardians do not pay attention to music classes, some students are affected by adults and “also feel that music class is just for fun, and it does not matter if they learn or not” (Mao, interview, September 23, 2022). Thus, it is crucial for music teachers to ensure effective classroom management to keep students engaged and disciplined, preventing disruptive behavior.

Moreover, Mrs. Mao suggests that although the absence of parental care contributes to the gap between rural and urban students’ music attitudes and abilities, it also contributes to a valuable intimate relationship between students and teachers. As all students living in school and most of them are “left-behind” children, Mrs. Mao feels that these students “are more dependent on their teachers because their grandparents do not pay much attention to them, and their mom and dad are not at home” (Mao, interview, September 11, 2022). School teachers are the adults who frequently accompany students and help with their daily lives, which is particularly pronounced in boarding schools where students spend the majority of their time with their teachers. Mrs. Mao takes this relationship as an important advantage for rural music teaching. She enjoys keeping a friend-like relationship with her students. “I do not have harsh discipline. I’m amiable with all my students” (Mao, interview, September 23, 2022). As a result, Mrs. Mao states that rural students tend to display greater respect and admiration towards their teachers in comparison to their urban counterparts.

Teaching Approaches

Mrs. Mao extensively discusses teaching approaches for her marginalized students. For students who have some physical and intellectual disadvantages, the only goal of music classes is to make them happy. Mrs. Mao understands that these students may behave in specific ways that differ from other students and not actively participate in the class and. She does not correct them and tends to leave more space for them. However, Mrs. Mao acknowledges that rural teachers lack a scientific approach to teaching children with physical and intellectual disabilities (Mao, interview, September 23, 2022).

Regarding “left-behind” children, Mrs. Mao has more experience in engaging them in music activities. She adopted different strategies based on their characteristics. For those who are expressive, Mrs. Mao provides them opportunities to develop self-expression through music making. For those who are introverted, she encourages peer collaboration during music activities. Mrs. Mao believes that “Generally, these students [“left-behind” children] enjoy music lessons more because I encourage them and give them the attention they haven’t received in other subjects” (Mao, interview, September 11, 2022). She sees the long-term impact of a supportive music environment on these children: “Some students who feel they are not good at the beginning will become especially confident and bold with the teacher's encouragement in music class and participation in music activities.” This effect is particularly apparent in Mrs. Mao’s opera class. After performing in various concerts and receiving compliments from audiences and judges, some “left-behind” children become confident in music and extend it to other fields.

Value of Music Education for Rural Students

Mrs. Mao highlights the moral function of music education and its potential to broaden students' horizons. She asserts that through music, students can access a wider range of knowledge and cultivate their own virtuosity through music appreciation and expression. In addition, Mrs. Mao notes that some students who deepen their music learning through Chinese opera classes become obsessed with it and eagerly look forward to participating in the activities every day. Their motivations are fully aroused. For "left-behind" children, Mrs. Mao believes that compared to other classes, they receive more attention from music teachers and have more opportunities to express themselves in music classes.

Mr. Yang at Tongli Town Rural Remote School (RMT)

Students' Background

Mr. Yang's school is a day school with a total of 97 students enrolled in grades 1 to 4. The school day begins at 8:20 am and ends at 4 pm, with an additional two hours allocated for after-school service. During the two hours, the school provides various "interests classes", such as music, dance, and art classes. Students are allowed to choose two classes for the entire semester. Those who select music courses have the opportunity to attend music classes every day.

Tongli Town Remote School is located in a small village where most villagers are elders and young children, and the local economy is underdeveloped. There are around 60% of students who are "left-behind" children. Mr. Yang describes the economic tiers at Chinese administrative levels - the most developed regions are first and second-tier cities, followed by the counties level, while the townships and villages are the least advanced compared to urban areas. Mr. Yang states that "With a population of 1.3 billion, [the economic conditions of] China's people

undoubtedly are different” (Yang, interview, October 16, 2022). The economic disparity between urban and rural areas is reflected in the discrepancy in music education opportunities. Mr. Yang, drawing from his experiences teaching in both urban and rural areas, acknowledges that “the educational level of the students there [urban] is higher. For the students at the teaching site [remote rural schools], they may have never learned anything about music literacy. This is the reality” (Yang, interview, October 16, 2022). Therefore, the lack of exposure to music knowledge makes it challenging for Mr. Yang to organize an ensemble. Adding to the difficulty is the shortage of instruments and limited rehearsal spaces in his small school. However, Mr. Yang also notes that the living conditions in his village are improving, with the basic needs of residents being met. Moreover, the overall atmosphere in the village is harmonious.

Students’ Learning Experiences

As more than 60% of students are “left-behind” children, Mr. Yang mainly discussed the learning experiences of these children in his music classes. Mr. Yang suggests that “left-behind” children are a significant concern in rural areas and local governments are actively involved in supporting the living and studying conditions of these students. Yearly censuses are conducted by schools.

Mr. Yang has identified several characteristics of “left-behind” children in his music class. First, “left-behind” children are emotionally affected by music related to the family. For instance, during a poem recitation, Mr. Yang accompanied a touching family-themed piece which caused many “left-behind” children to cry. Furthermore, “left-behind” children tend to be more independent and hardworking. As their caregivers, mostly grandparents, cannot assist with their studies, “left-behind” children must complete all the school tasks, such as practicing dance and songs by themselves. However, the lack of parental guidance also leads to slower learning.

Mr. Yang recognizes that if the parents were at home, they could supervise their children's learning and improve their comprehension skills. To address this, Mr. Yang actively engages with students by seeking their feedback, reinforcing important knowledge, and frequently asking questions to ensure their understanding (Yang, interview, October 30, 2022).

Considering the characteristics of "left-behind" children, music teachers need to carefully select appropriate music pieces. Songs related to family are particularly impactful for these students, but it's essential to avoid overly emotionally charged songs that might hinder their performance. Mr. Yang understands that while evoking strong emotions can be powerful on stage, it shouldn't detrimentally affect their overall experience. Additionally, Mr. Yang emphasizes the importance of supporting "left-behind" children during holidays and special occasions, such as Father's Day and Mother's Day. In cases where students don't have parents at home, Mr. Yang will encourage them to have a video call with their parents, acknowledging the emotional significance of these events. Thus, being mindful of the emotional impact of music is crucial when organizing activities related to parenthood, as it has the potential to deeply affect "left-behind" children's emotions.

Furthermore, some "left-behind" children experience the feeling of loneliness due to the generation gap with their grandparents. To help alleviate their sense of solitude, Mr. Yang suggests that music teachers can play a crucial role by teaching them songs that allow them to enjoy music and sing even outside of the classroom. Music can serve as a companion for these children when they don't have friends to play with, providing them with solace and emotional support (Yang, interview, October 16, 2022).

Teaching Approaches

Music Appreciation. Nowadays, students have easy access to diverse online music resources and are immersed in popular music. However, Mr. Yang believes that when students hear pop music, they are not thinking about why they like it. As a school music teacher, he endeavors to guide his students to develop a deeper appreciation for music by encouraging them to explore the songs in their textbooks. He emphasizes that “these songs [in the textbook] are good for practicing their voice, pitch, and rhythm” as they are scientifically selected and designed to accommodate the needs of elementary students. He hopes to get his students to care more about classroom music and learn how to appreciate “excellent music”. In this case, they are able to choose and appreciate music using aesthetic concepts when exploring online resources.

The Pacing of Instruction. “The teachers need to present contents step by step, especially when it comes to professional skills” (Yang, interview, October 16, 2022). Little exposure to systematic music learning results in his students’ lower music literacy and narrower music horizons. Mr. Yang describes the challenges for him to organize choir and instrumental ensembles in the RMT. It is almost impossible for students to conduct polyphonic playing because of the precision vocal harmony requirements. Typically, when students sing a two-part song, they are easily interfered with by the melody and finally, the students sing in unison. In this case, Mr. Yang cannot expect his students to perform as an advanced ensemble in a short time. He suggested that music teachers’ need to slow down the pace to improve students’ musical abilities sequentially and then organize music activities to accommodate their music levels (Yang, interview, October 16, 2022).

Discipline and Classroom Management. Drawing from his years of ensemble teaching experiences, Mr. Yang firmly believes that “great discipline is a foundation for performance.” He

emphasizes that “without discipline, there is no show” (Yang, interview, October 16, 2022). When there is a scheduled date for a performance, Mr. Yang must make every minute of rehearsal time efficient and productive, as his time with students to rehearse is limited. Strict discipline contributes to effective rehearsals and successful performances. Mr. Yang is stricter for rehearsal than for daily classes. He thinks his teaching style is unique compared to most general music teachers due to his diverse teaching experiences. Additionally, as a male music teacher (a rarity in rural areas), Mr. Yang feels that his working style is more direct (Yang, interview, October 16, 2022).

Mr. Yang describes how he establishes his leadership and applies strict discipline measures effectively. For instance, as Mr. Yang primarily teaches third graders, when he involved fourth graders in his rehearsal, these upper students did not quite listen to him. He describes the process of establishing authority for all students in that rehearsal:

I told them that if you don't know how to perform, I can teach you, but if you cannot follow the discipline, I'll replace you. So, the students were willing to participate because they feared being replaced. It's a group, and I can't waste everyone's time because of one student. (Yang, interview, October 16, 2022)

Mr. Yang values the cohesion and unity of the group and believes that it is a prerequisite for a successful performance. Additionally, Mr. Yang establishes his authority by convincing students of his musical abilities and sharing his diverse band teaching experiences. He shares his band concert videos and shows them the prizes he won. He believes this is an effective approach to earn students' trust and respect and convince these children that as long as they follow his guidance, they can also achieve a successful performance.

Stimulating Students' Motivation. When organizing music events, a challenge for Mr. Yang is motivating students to participate, as many of them are not accustomed to performing in public and tend to be introverted. To stimulate participation, Mr. Yang prepares two shows with different numbers of required performers. The first one needs fewer while the second needs more. By picking students for the first show, which requires fewer people, Mr. Yang makes students feel like the positions they fill are rare. Then, when there are only two or three positions left, some students feel a rush to participate. At this point, Mr. Yang informs them that they still have an opportunity to perform in the second show, which sparks even more interest among his students. This strategy shows that most students are actually interested in music activities, but they need some motivation to overcome their hesitations and worries.

Value of Music Education for Rural Students

Reduce Stress and Motivate Potential. Mr. Yang highlighted two significant benefits of music classes for students' academic studies—reducing stress and motivating potential. “Students are very tired during the school day” (Yang, interview, October 30, 2022). When students feel tired and drowsy, they cannot concentrate on their academic studies. In such circumstances, the school arranges one music class to “energize and relax students and improve their learning efficiency.” This is why “arts classes are generally scheduled in the fourth class of the morning or the first class of the afternoon when students are most likely to feel sleepy” (Yang, interview, October 30, 2022). Also, music class is a place for students to develop their potential and establish their confidence. Mr. Yang mentions,

Students who are struggling academically and can't achieve good results may explore their musical talent in music classes. Then, this accomplishment is transferred to other fields. We need to believe that students' potential is endless. The students who have been

number one in a subject will not want to be number two in others. (Yang, interview, October 30, 2022)

Moreover, the boost in confidence that comes with learning music can be applied to other areas of study, enabling students to achieve success in all fields.

Contribute to Moral and Aesthetic Education. In school music education, moral education and aesthetic education are the two fundamental and primary goals across all levels of formal music education in China. The 2022 Arts Curriculum Standard regards the cultivation of moral character and the promotion of student well-being as the fundamental task of education. The goal is to foster and practice socialist core values and strengthen the education of socialist advanced culture and excellent traditional Chinese culture (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2022). This philosophy of aesthetic education has been a long-standing goal of arts courses in China. With the development of quality education, aesthetic education has become increasingly emphasized in school education. The new curriculum stresses that "arts courses should adhere to the cultivation of aesthetic education and lead students to practice healthy and upward aesthetics" (p. 2).

Mr. Yang adheres to these two important goals of music education and firmly believes in the value of music for students' moral and aesthetic education. According to Mr. Yang, music learning has a positive impact on students' personality, demeanor, and overall refinement: "[After learning music,] people become more qualified and elegant. For example, in the first few years, after I graduated [from a music major], people can tell I was a music student by just looking at me. It's about the personal charm" (Yang, interview, October 30, 2022).

Mr. Yang asserts that "learning music broadens students' horizons because they have seen and experienced these elegant and sophisticated things" (Yang, interview, October 30,

2022). Standing under the spotlight on stage may change students' thoughts and motivate them to pursue bigger opportunities. Nowadays, many young generations have idols. Mr. Yang suggests that if they could see how their idols work hard to achieve the success, it would inspire them to study hard and become excellent people. Students will “know what looks good and which direction they want to go.... If a kid is unkempt, he will make himself clean after he has been on stage because he knows what looks good. It's all about aesthetics, and it's a vision that music provides” (Yang, interview, October 30, 2022). However, the effectiveness of music education in cultivating aesthetic education ultimately depends on the individual. Mr. Yang has encountered many music students who learned music just to show off, which does not lead to an improvement in their aesthetic perception. Consequentially, music educators' guidance is pivotal.

Another core value of music education is moral education. Drawing on several years of music teaching experience, Mr. Yang strongly believes that music plays a crucial role in moral education. He emphasizes the need for moral education: “If you don't love your country, how can you talk about knowledge? Activities that celebrate the country and the party, family reunions, and commemorate loved ones will cultivate students' morality. This is very important” (Yang, interview, October 30, 2022). Nowadays, it is encouraged to organize activities that focus on traditional culture and festivals to cultivate students' cultural confidence, sense of responsibility towards family and society, and patriotism, such as National Day, New Year's Day, Children's Day, etc. Mr. Yang narrates that music can accompany all the festivals and enhance emotion:

On National Day, I can arrange a chorus to dedicate a song to the motherland. On September 18 (commemorating World War II), I can arrange a poetry recitation with a musical background for Red Education (Chinese revolutionary education). All activities can have musical elements. (Yang, interview, October 30, 2022)

Also, in recent years, “the state advocates for the inheritance and flourishing of China’s traditional culture, including traditional music and folk songs.” As a result, all public schools in Ren County organize related activities yearly, such as traditional culture and folk arts—for example, *Yangge* (dance 秧歌), juggling, and *Shuanghuang* (a two-man comic show 双簧), with the goal to improve students’ understanding and interest in Chinese traditional culture and to cultivate their confidence and love of country.

Mr. Yang believed that moral and aesthetic education is vital and inseparable, and the potential of music activities is enormous for these two objectives. When this type of education is implemented comprehensively, students will become sensible and of good character.

Benefits for Students’ Confidence. Mr. Yang highly values individuals with diverse talents and recognizes their potential for success in different fields. He attributes their achievements to their self-assurance and boldness when it comes to public performance. Mr. Yang said, “You see a lot of students nowadays squirm when they do something.” If teachers can cultivate their confidence through learning music, students may be able to transfer this confidence to everything they do. “Once you have achieved first place, you don’t want to settle for second place in any field...They will keep improving themselves, which will determine the kind of person they become” (Yang, interview, October 30, 2022). Furthermore, Mr. Yang believes that “Even though music may not be a profession for the majority of people, it serves as a powerful means for expressing their emotions.” Also, the early exposure to music education can provide students with an anchor and a lifelong passion. For instance, many Chinese elders go to parks to learn and play instruments and recognize music as a lifelong companion.

Broaden Horizons and Improve Discipline. According to Mr. Yang, music education not only exposes students to beautiful experiences but also offers them opportunities to step onto

a larger stage, explore their potential, and pursue their dreams. He cites examples of famous scientists, like Einstein who also plays violin, to illustrate how music can expand one's vision and thoughts. Furthermore, in Yang's teaching philosophy, maintaining discipline is essential to achieving outstanding performance, as it helps cultivate positive habits that extend beyond music education (Yang, interview, October 30, 2022).

Overall, Mr. Yang is a leader with firm and serious demeanor who holds a strong philosophy of music rehearsal and performance and highlights the importance of strict discipline. Also, he considers the needs of "left-behind" children in his teaching approach and has a keen awareness of the emotional impact music can have on these children. He sees music as a powerful tool for conducting both aesthetic and moral education and believes it can help relieve students' pressure and broaden their horizons.

Cross-Cases Themes

Following the analysis of data from individual cases, I developed cross-case themes through the comparison of within-case themes. From this analysis, five themes emerged: the gap between urban and rural schools, the music learning characteristics of rural students, classroom management, the value of music education for rural students, and "left-behind" children. In this section, I will discuss each of these themes in an attempt to provide a comprehensive picture of the music learning experiences of students in rural Ren County.

In conversations with teachers, it was evident that they firmly believed in the existence of significant disparities in economic conditions, educational backgrounds, and educational perspectives between urban and rural areas. While rural regions possess a rich folk music culture, it has become outdated and marginalized over time. Music learning for rural students primarily relies on school music classes and activities. However, we also need to realize that the perception

of rural music teachers regarding the advantages of urban music education aligns with Bate's concept of urban normativity in music education (Bates, 2016). Urban normativity refers to “an underlying structure and cultural rationality that privileges urban centers” while marginalizing and exploiting rural peripheries (Bates, 2016, p. 164). Within the realm of music education, the focus on urban performance practices, performance spaces, and music pedagogy inadvertently steers rural students and teachers away from their rural backgrounds and lifestyles.

Consequently, this perpetuates a biased perspective that regards rural life and musicality as inferior, despite the manifold personal, social, and environmental benefits inherent in rural communities. (Bates, 2013).

Due to the absence of an overall music education environment and limited parental attention in rural areas, students tend to perceive music as a recreational activity rather than a formal subject. Even though the three teachers believe in creating a fun and relaxed atmosphere in the music classroom, they also recognize the need for systematic music education to bridge the gap in music literacy between rural and urban students. However, the inadequate foundation and lack of emphasis on music learning among rural students present challenges in their ability to grasp musical knowledge consistently and retain what they have learned. To accommodate varying learning speeds and enhance learning, the teachers often slow down the pace, reinforce knowledge points, and employ concrete methods to teach abstract music concepts. Additionally, all teachers in rural areas recognize the significant influence of popular music on their students. Students' strong interest in popular music is evident and impacts their academic learning. Therefore, while adhering to the prescribed curriculum, teachers incorporate popular music as a form of reward and aim to develop students' aesthetic abilities by fostering their ability to discern and appreciate popular music in daily life.

All three teachers value classroom management. In a class of 60 students, it can be a challenge to create an environment where students can relax and express themselves through music while maintaining a structured music class. Thus, the music learning contents for their classes primarily focus on singing, music appreciation, and incorporating small movements. Mrs. Mao and Mr. Yang think that some “left-behind” children who were raised by their grandparents may be more mischievous, so it is important to establish rules for the classroom and make the content engaging to capture students’ attention. Mr. Yang takes discipline as one part of the moral education. When students cultivate great discipline through music rehearsing, their great habits will affect all academic areas.

Although rural music education faces many challenges, the teachers all describe the value of music for students. Consistent with current Chinese education philosophy, rural teachers recognize the value of music education in fostering moral and aesthetic education. Additionally, music classes are indispensable for students to relax and recharge amid their heavy academic pressures. Moreover, music activities are of great importance for rural students to boost their confidence and broaden their horizons. By encouraging students to perform on stage and believe in their abilities, they will pursue bigger stages and greater dreams. This is especially important for students in remote areas where information is not readily available, and resources are scarce. Furthermore, the teachers believe that music education during elementary school is crucial. If students can establish a positive connection with music at a young age, it has the potential to enrich their lives indefinitely.

In three rural schools, more than half of the students are “left-behind” children. Mr. Yang mentions that the personalities of “left-behind” children can be extreme—either very introverted or very active. In music class, teachers give these children extra attention and encourage them to

express themselves according to their personality traits. Mrs. Mao believes that “left-behind” children enjoy music classes because they receive the attention that they may not get in other classes.

Chapter 7

Discussion and Conclusion

Through the voices of three rural music teachers and one rural music director, I have explored the value of music education in Chinese society, the educational system, and local school communities. In this final chapter, I bring together the findings from previous chapters to discuss three main themes that participants identified. Additionally, drawing upon previous literature, I conceptualize the findings and provide insights and implications for future research and practice in this area. Three main themes emerged: 1) National policy and local implementation, 2) Influence of community, and 3) Resources impacting rural music teaching and learning.

National Policy and Local Implementation

From the findings of the study, there is no doubt that current music education in Ren County is much improved than previous. All the teachers reflect on the rise in the number of music activities, the expanding opportunities available to rural teachers, and the improved status of music teachers in Ren County in recent years. Music teachers feel the positive trends in local music education that began with the issue of “Double Reduction” and quality (*suzhi*) education (Wan, interview, September 21, 2022). Guo and Nie (2022) suggest that the “Double Reduction” policy has led to a greater emphasis on school music education, as the reduced academic burden provides students with more time and opportunities to participate in music-related activities. The growing number of music activities fosters an active community for rural music teachers, offering them opportunities to enhance their teaching and professional skills. This sense of belonging contributes to their retention within the field. The policy inclination toward arts

education gives arts teachers hope. Mrs. Wan states that “I don't think I will change my job. The road ahead may be difficult, but I can see the light now” (Wan, interview, September 21, 2022).

With the implementation of the “Double Reduction” policy, The 2022 arts curriculum standard promotes music education practice from multiple perspectives and in diverse forms, elevating its significance to the level of cultivating a well-rounded individual. However, the increased emphasis on music also brings added pressure on music teachers, as acknowledged by Mrs. Wan, who states, “I think the challenge for music teachers will be greater because of the more comprehensive and complex contents” (Interview, September 24, 2022). In this case, Director Mei initiates a series of seminars to help music teachers understand and incorporate the New Arts Curriculum Standard in their classes. Furthermore, the guiding ideology of this curriculum emphasizes the role of music education in moral and aesthetic development.

Guo and Nie (2022) propose that the aforementioned developments in music education are largely attributed to the increased influence and elevated status of aesthetic education. Music, as an important component of arts education, is availing of more opportunities. Nonetheless, despite the fact that there is growing emphasis on implementing current policies, in comparison to the "core" subjects, music education remains in a secondary position. In China's education system, which places a premium on academic excellence, the music curriculum is frequently disregarded by parents and schools due to the absence of standardized tests. This is especially serious in rural areas where parents prioritize college admission as a means for their children to succeed and do not recognize the value of aesthetic education.

In both EXP, music teachers expressed their concerns about the disjointed attitude towards the music subject at both the county and school levels. Even though there has been significant progress in the implementation of music-related policies at the county level, music

teachers have not felt a real change in attitude and policy towards music classes within their schools. In the face of the current pressure to get higher grades, the entire school community still focuses on academic performance. Comprehensive development and quality education are still at the slogan stage, and arts education remains in a vulnerable status in their schools.

Moreover, the unfair recruitment and retention strategies exacerbate the severe shortage of music teachers in rural schools, particularly in RMT. Liu (2017) and Wang (2016) have both pointed out the problem of "being unable to recruit and retain teachers" in rural areas. In Ren County, the recruitment ratio for music teachers in 2022 was only 1%, with a maximum age limit of 35 ([Ren] County Government, 2022). Such recruitment policies have resulted in an exclusion of many qualified graduates and experienced teachers who aspire to teach in rural areas. Mrs. Mao indicated that the reserve of music teachers should be improving given the increasing number of university graduates. Therefore, the fundamental issue underlying the shortage of music teachers in rural areas is not the lack of potential pre-service music teachers, but the exceedingly low number of music teacher positions offered by schools and recruited by local governments. As noted by Mr. Yang, the limited number of formal music teacher positions available annually has led to intense competition, which is why he opted to become an SPT (Yang, interview, October 30, 2022).

What's even more serious is that the retention rate of music teachers is threatened by holding multiple tasks and the promotion system. New music teachers are likely to be assigned to teach other subjects and the promotion system favors teachers in "core subjects", which causes many music teachers to give up music teaching and turn to teach these subjects. Huang (2020), addressing the promotion mechanism for primary and secondary school teachers, points out that the academic-performance based assessment criterion ignores the various knowledge and skills

of teachers in different disciplines, thus creating inequity in the promotion system. The limited number of promotion quotas not only hinders teachers' career advancement but also negatively impacts their motivation, often leading to a sense of frustration and fostering unhealthy competition among teachers.

Consequently, rural music teachers' job satisfaction is negatively affected by undervaluation in the school community and the unfair recruitment and promotion mechanism. According to Cao's (2011) exploration of the happiness of primary and secondary school music teachers in China, even though the state and local departments have gradually increased their attention to music education, the status of the music subject has not substantially improved when facing the reality of entrance exams to university. Many primary and secondary school teachers believe that their social status is lower than that of the main subject teachers, which greatly affects their sense of happiness. To address these issues, the Chinese government has advocated the establishment of reasonable evaluation mechanisms for music courses and conducted a series of experiments on the integration of arts education into the Middle School Entrance Examination. Director Mei states that the main purpose of introducing music into the standardized examination is to urge all schools to conduct music classes according to the national standards and to discourage schools from abandoning music programs.

Influence of Community

The three music teachers acknowledge the support they receive from the County Education Bureau and the curriculum director. Director Mei, who has a background as a music teacher, is praised for her understanding of the value of music education and the needs of rural music teachers. This support has been instrumental in the development of music education in Ren County. Guo and Yang (2022) assert the importance of the attitude of local leaders. They

suggest that the development of rural music education primarily depends on local education departments and schools. The top priority in solving the dilemma of rural school music education is for the leaders, including the education bureau director and the school principal, to value aesthetics education. It is crucial to increase their awareness and recognition of the value of aesthetic education to make them truly believe that aesthetic education is essential for rural children. Fu (2015) suggests that advocating for quality (*suzhi*) education leads to increased approval from school administrators regarding the value of music, as they shift their focus beyond test scores.

The school community is an integral factor in a thriving music program and in teachers' everyday experiences. After conducting a survey of 432 U.S. music teachers, Abril and Bannerman (2015) reported that factors at a micro level, such as colleagues, students, principals, and parents, whom they can easily interact with, greatly impact their teaching experiences. Anderson (2017) and Prest (2013) suggest rural music programs are richer in community support.

In contrast to the increasing support felt by rural music teachers from the county level, teachers note that the principals and caregivers still undervalue music education and prioritize academic performance. The attitude of the principal is significant to the development of the music program and music teachers' work experiences. Director Mei states that a visionary principal values all subjects, including music (Mei, interview, October 4, 2022). However, in real situations, many rural principals cannot see the long-term benefits of music on students and undervalue the efforts of music teachers. All three teachers have multiple duties in the school because music teaching is not regarded as an important demanding job. This lack of understanding is also reflected in Zhou's (2018) study, which found that most school leaders

lacked proper knowledge of music education's content and aesthetic nature, leading to undervaluing its importance in student development.

Furthermore, the attitude of the principal affects the attitude of colleagues. In the boarding schools, participants reported that only a small number of colleagues can recognize the value of music, with many teachers believing that music activities may interfere with students' academic learning time. However, despite this lack of value placed on music education by colleagues, rural teachers maintain strong relationships with each other. As the three teachers grew up in rural areas and are working in schools near their native villages, they have emotional connections with their place of work and their colleagues, especially for Mrs. Mao and Mrs. Wan, who were working in the school for a long time.

In addition, the close relationship between teachers and students is mentioned by the two boarding school teachers. Given that many students in boarding schools are "left-behind" children who spend more time with their teachers than with their families, they show greater reliance and respect towards their teachers. Mrs. Mao states, "they generally listen to their teachers more than do children in urban areas" (interview, September 23, 2022). Rural students also display enthusiasm for music classes and a curiosity about their teachers' instruction.

All participants believe that music education is necessary for students to develop their aesthetic and moral ability, boost their confidence, alleviate their academic pressure and benefit their mental health. Chen (2020) reports that music intervention can effectively improve the subject well-being of rural "left-behind" children. Catterall (2012), addressing the arts education for at-risk students in the U.S., also indicates that children with disadvantaged backgrounds are most likely to benefit from arts learning.

However, the limited and varying music backgrounds of students present difficulties in music teaching. Teachers must be patient and adaptable in their approach to accommodate students' different levels of understanding and interests. While rural students generally enjoy music, they often view it more as entertainment and show greater interest in popular music rather than the curriculum-defined music. Wang's (2004) survey also reflects that more than 74% of rural students indicated that they like music, but only 35% of students enjoy music classes. This poses a balancing challenge for music teachers in skill development and creating a positive and enjoyable learning experience.

Regarding parents' involvement, both EXP teachers note weak cooperation between the school and students' guardians. One reason is that many grandparents lack enough knowledge to assist with their children's studies, leading to a reliance on school teachers. Another reason is that in boarding schools, limited involvement in school affairs and the disconnection between the school and students' families, especially when grandparents are unfamiliar with electronic devices, contribute to the weak cooperation between the two.

Resources Impacting Rural Teaching and Learning

Guo and Yang (2022) argue that the most significant inequality in Chinese education is in the area of arts education. While other forms of inequality tend to be about differences in the quality of teaching, the inequality in arts education is about whether or not students have access to arts classes. In many RMT in Ren County, for instance, music class is not available due to the lack of dedicated music teachers. This has resulted in a gap in music abilities between rural and urban students beginning in first grade. Furthermore, students are not exposed to rich music resources and environments in rural schools. Even in the rural EXP, there are not enough instruments and dedicated music classrooms. In contrast, some urban schools have their own

bands and choirs, and urban parents are willing to support their children's performance attire and instruments. Regarding the out-of-school environment, there are very few music extracurricular music events and concerts in rural areas, and rural traditional music does not appeal to young people. In contrast, children in urban areas have access to a range of out-of-school music learning resources within their community. According to Wang (2018), each child in urban areas typically has access to at least one to four such resources.

The music teacher shortage is another crucial factor in the development of rural music education. Young teachers view rural teaching as a temporary position and eventually leave for urban areas. Qualified rural teachers can also apply to transfer to urban areas, leading to the concentration of excellent teaching resources in urban schools and widening the gap between urban and rural teacher resources. Director Mei (Interview, October 16, 2022) acknowledges that due to resource limitations and lower levels of attention, rural teachers often face difficulties in developing their professional skills.

However, teachers have also reported some positive changes in rural resources. First, the Ren County Government has increased investment in educational technology. In 2019, they invested 150 million yuan in online education technology to ensure that every public school has multimedia and electronic boards, providing teachers with many resources to improve teaching quality. The Educational Bureau developed live music classes in EXP and transmitted them to all RMT, which do not have arts specialists (Wan, September 24, 2022). Second, Director Mei organizes a series of teacher development activities and workshops to help develop rural teachers' professional and teaching skills as much as possible. Third, rural teachers can receive certain subsidies for transportation based on the distance from urban areas (Mao, September 23, 2022).

In conclusion, findings from this research study suggest that the experiences and perceptions of participants regarding rural music education are multi-layered and intricate. Participants frame the three main themes from both positive and negative perspectives, with rewards and challenges being interwoven throughout their conversations. They shed light on the deep-seated problems affecting rural music education while also expressing their optimism due to current positive developments in the field.

Conclusion and Recommendation

In this study, participants have presented the current challenges faced in rural music education but also noted that the situation has improved in recent years. It is evident that standardized entrance examinations have a fundamental impact on the status of music education in rural schools. In recent years, as the Chinese government aims to reduce student workload and promote aesthetic education, many cities have begun pilot programs to include music as a subject in middle school entrance exams. Guo and Wang (2021), Chinese music education experts, point out that the key to the success of music education in entrance exams lies in achieving a balance between getting higher scores and cultivating a holistic student. If the standardized music exams only emphasize skills and scores, they will not achieve the goal of promoting aesthetic education and even hinder students' overall development. Therefore, when formulating exam content and format for music, the goal of cultivating comprehensive individuals should be given priority. Under the guidance of the appropriate music exam format, music teachers will be required to teach basic music knowledge and skills while also guide to appreciate and experience beauty in music.

Furthermore, the gap between urban and rural areas was a prominent topic throughout the interviews with rural teachers. The disparity in music programs between urban and rural areas in

China is apparent. Many rural schools are unable to provide music courses or ensure the quality of music instruction. To address this issue, the government should tailor policies and assessments based on the music situations of each region's schools, local cultural characteristics, and students' home situations. Utilizing technology and training part-time music teachers can be an effective solution for the absence of music teachers. Moreover, in terms of music resources, government support should be based on the needs of rural music classes and teachers. Instead of funding limited amounts of electronic keyboards and expensive instruments, the government can purchase low-cost classroom instruments such as recorders, Chinese hulusi⁴, and xun⁵. These instruments are easy to learn and can truly enhance the richness of music classes and improve students' classroom experiences. According to the theory of urban normativity (Bates, 2013), it is essential for rural educators to recognize and critically examine the cultural hierarchies between rural and urban areas and utilize the unique advantages of rural life and music culture. By doing so, they can challenge the prevailing biases and stereotypes and promote a more inclusive and empowering music education experience for rural students.

In rural schools in Ren County, the principal's attitude plays a crucial role in the development of music programs and the motivation and happiness of music teachers. Therefore, local music education training should involve the school principals. These trainings aim to deepen principals' understanding of the content and value of music classes, thereby improving their attitudes towards music education. In addition, recruitment and promotion systems are the important factors that affect the number of rural music teachers and their job satisfaction. The prerequisite of improving aesthetic education is enabling these two systems to provide more

⁴ A Chinese traditional instrument. It is held in a vertical position and consists of a wind chest made from a Calabash gourd, through which three bamboo pipes pass.

⁵ Xun is a globular vessel flute and is one of the oldest instruments in China.

opportunities for music teachers and achieve a positive cycle. When recruiting rural teachers, it is important to involve a wide range of music talent. The evaluation criteria for the promotion system should be more diverse to accommodate the characteristics of different disciplines and increase fairness among disciplines.

All participants state the value of music for rural students, especially for the large number of “left-behind” children. In order to educate rural students appropriately, local education departments should provide specialized training for teachers, school leaders, and caregivers to introduce rural students’ development characteristics, provide effective teaching methods, and help establish effective home-school communication. Although the absence of parental care will put rural students in a vulnerable situation, an appropriate school environment and education can complement the absence.

Despite the fact that the definition of rural and urban schools differs between China and the United States, through a comparison of research literature, I have identified some similarities in rural music education between the two countries. Anderson (2017) mentions that some rural schools in Michigan lack the resources to offer band and music classes, indicating a gap in equipment and materials compared to urban and suburban schools. Moreover, the national standardized evaluations in the U.S. also impact rural music education. Reback et al. (2014) state that ‘The No Child Left Behind Act’(NCLB) has linked school sanctions to student performance, leading to increased accountability and pressure on teachers to produce results. In Hunt's (2007) research, some rural music teachers reported that the requirements and demands of the NCLB have created conflicts and limited the amount of time that students can devote to music classes and practice. Therefore, I hope that the findings from this study can motivate future international comparative studies.

This study presents the viewpoints of three rural music teachers on the significance of teaching general music in Ren County, Henan Province, and sheds light on the learning experiences of rural students. It provides references and recommendations for music educators, school administrations, and researchers interested in Chinese rural music education.

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Appendix A

Sample Informed Consent Form in English

As part of their review, the University of Michigan Institutional Review Board Health Sciences and Behavioral Sciences has determined that this study is no more than minimal risk and exempt from on-going IRB oversight.

YOUR CONSENT

Consent/Assent to Participate in the Research Study

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. I/We will give you a copy of this document for your records and I/we will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information in Section 9 provided above.

I understand what the study is about and my questions so far have been answered. I agree to take part in this study.

Print Legal Name: _____

Signature: _____

Date of Signature (mm/dd/yy): _____

11. OPTIONAL CONSENT

Consent to use video recordings, audio recordings, and photography for purposes of this research.

This study involves video recordings, audio recordings, and photography. If you do not agree to be video recordings, audio recordings, and photography, you can still take part in the study.

_____ Yes, I agree to be video recordings, audio recordings, and photography.

_____ No, I do not agree to be video recordings, audio recordings, and photography.

Print Legal Name: _____

Signature: _____

Date of Signature (mm/dd/yy): _____

Consent to use of video recordings, audio recordings or photographs for publications, presentations or for educational purposes.

I give permission for audio recordings/video recordings/photographs made of me as part the research to be used in publications, presentations or for educational purposes.

_____ Yes

_____ No

Print Legal Name: _____

Signature: _____

Date of Signature (mm/dd/yy): _____

Consent to use and/or share your identifiable information for future research

The researchers would like to use your identifiable information for future research that may be similar to or completely different from this research project. Identifiable means that the data will contain information that can be used to directly identify you. The study team will not contact you for additional consent to this future research. We may also share your identifiable information with other researchers. You can contact us at any time to ask us to stop using your information. However, we will not be able to take back your information from research projects that have already used it.

_____ Yes, I agree to let the researcher(s) use or share my personally identifiable information for future research.

_____ No, I do not agree to let the researcher(s) use or share my personally identifiable information for future research.

Print Legal Name: _____

Signature: _____

Date of Signature (mm/dd/yy): _____

Consent to be Contacted for Participation in Future Research

Researchers may wish to keep your contact information to invite you to be in future research projects that may be similar to or completely different from this research project.

_____ Yes, I agree for the researchers to contact me for future research projects.

_____ No, I do not agree for the researchers to contact me for future research projects.

Appendix B

Sample Informed Consent Form in Mandarin

10. 您的同意书

参与研究同意书

通过签署本文件，你同意参与本研究。在签字之前，请确保你了解该研究的内容。您可以留存一份电子版文件作为记录。如果你在签署本文件后对研究有任何疑问，您可以直接联系研究小组。

我了解这项研究的内容，我的问题到目前为止已经得到解答。我同意参加这项研究。

签名_____

签名日期（月/日/年）_____

11. 同意研究员对采访过程进行录音、录像。

本研究涉及录像、录音和摄影。如果你不同意被录像、录音，你仍然可以参加这项研究。

____ 是的，我同意接受录像、录音。

____ 不，我不同意接受录像、录音。

签名_____

签名日期（月/日/年）_____

同意将录像、录音或照片用于出版物、演讲或教育目的：

我同意将我的录音/录像/照片作为研究的一部分，用于出版物、演讲或教育目的。

____ 是

____ 否

签名_____

签名日期（月/日/年）_____

同意在未来的研究中使用和/或分享你的可识别信息：

研究人员希望将您的可识别信息用于未来的研究，这些研究可能与本研究项目类似或完全不同。可识别的意思是，数据将包含可用于直接识别您的信息。研究小组将不会与你联

系，征求你对这项未来研究的额外同意。我们也可能与其他研究人员分享你的可识别信息。你可以在任何时候联系我们，要求我们停止使用你的信息。然而，我们将无法从已经使用过你的信息的研究项目中删除您的信息。

____ 是的，我同意让研究人员为未来的研究使用或分享我的个人信息。

____ 不，我不同意让研究人员在未来的研究中使用或分享我的个人信息。

签名_____

签名日期（月/日/年）_____

同意因参与未来研究而被联系：

研究人员可能希望保留您的联系信息，以邀请您参加未来的研究项目，这些项目可能与本研究项目类似或完全不同。

____ 是的，我同意研究人员就未来的研究项目与我联系。

____ 不，我不同意研究人员就未来的研究项目与我联系。

Appendix C

Pre-survey Questions

How many years have you taught?

What level of education have you completed?

What was your major for your highest degree? When did you complete this degree?

What additional certifications or training have you earned? When did you have them?

Do you have student teaching experiences?

Work Experience:

How many years have you been teaching music?

How many years have you been teaching at this rural school?

What classes and grade levels do you teach now? How many classes do you teach each week?

Do you have other responsibilities besides music teacher? If so, please write down.

In what other setting have you taught? Rural or urban?

School Information:

Please introduce your school: a) name, b) location, c) equipment, d) ranks, and e) educational focus.

Please describe your school community: a) economy, b) educational level, c) ages and d) attitude toward education and teachers.

Please describe the student population and demographic at this school: a) school population, b) average number in each class, c) gender and d) the percentage of children “left behind” in your school.

What is the mainly district policy for the rural music program?

What is the relationship between you and your principal, students and students' guardians?

Music Program:

How many music teachers are in your school?

What is your routine for music classes? (Would you mind providing your calendar and schedule for your school and music program?)

Have you taught enrichment programs or offered additional opportunities to students to supplement their music education in the past or present?

How adequate is your supply of resources? Can those resources support your music teaching?

Appendix D

Questions for the First Semi-structured Interview with Music Teachers

Early Experiences

1. Describe your music learning experiences. (Did you grow up in rural areas? Why did you select a music major?)
2. Why did you decide to become a music teacher in a rural school district?
3. Narrate the beginning of your career.
 - What were the similarities and differences with your expectation?
 - How did you adapt to rural teaching?
 - What were your career goals and self-requirements at the beginning of teaching and now?
4. In what other school settings have you taught? (What can you share with me about the experience? Why did you leave the position to come to this school?)
5. What was music education like during your school days and early years of work? How did it change? Did music education become more important or more marginal?

Present Teaching

1. Please describe your school and school districts.
 - The school (Ranking, Teaching Focus, Academic Environment, Attitude toward Music...).
 - The school districts (Economy, Educational Level, Demography...).
2. Please describe the local education. (General information, policy, requirement, focus, level, education environment, and educational system...)

3. Please describe the local music education. (General information, policy, requirement, textbook, budget, activities, promotion system, salary, professional development, music atmosphere...)
 - Are there any resources for music teachers' professional development?
 - Please describe the promotion system and its effect.
 - Please describe the teaching evaluation system and its effect.
4. Please describe the music program in your school. (Curriculum, contents, music activities, supplies, schools' attitudes).
 - What is your annual income for teaching music in school? Do you have an extra budget allowance for the music program?
5. Please describe more about the policy for local music education and its effect (New teachers supports).
6. Please describe your work.
 - What are the main responsibilities of a music teacher?
 - What is a typical workday/week like for you?
 - What are the contents of your classes?
 - Please describe your relationships with others (school administrator, other music teachers, local music directors, students, and parents...)
 - Do you cooperate with the school district?
7. Please describe the current situation of rural music teachers.
8. What is the effect of Covid-19 on rural music education?
9. Describe your students.
 - How do you describe your rural students?

- How do you think about your students' learning style?
- How do you teach them? What are your relationships? Please give examples.
- What are your teaching concepts and methods?

10. Please describe the at-risk students in your school, such as children "left behind."

- Who are at-risk students in your school?
- What are their living situation and academic performance?
- Do they get support from society, school, and teachers?
- What are their music learning experiences?
- What are effective instructional methods for at-risk students? Please give examples.

11. Please describe one of the most impressive things with students.

12. Please describe the work you feel most accomplished.

13. Please describe one of the biggest challenges you have met.

14. What stands out for you in your teaching experience as the school year comes to a close?

Can you offer anecdotes to illustrate those issues?

15. Is there anything I didn't ask you about the topics of this interview that you think I should consider?

Appendix E

Questions for the Second Semi-structured Interview with Music Teachers

1. You mentioned that you grew up in rural areas in the previous interview. What did that mean to you? How do those experiences affect your rural work?
2. How did your educational experiences and academic degree influence your career?
3. What specific skills and concepts are important for rural general music education? Please explain the reasons.
4. If you could go back to the beginning of your career, what suggestions would you give yourself?
5. In your survey, you described the role of music education in schools and school districts in three terms. Can you explain this in detail with examples?
6. In your survey, you described the role of music teachers in schools and school districts in three terms. Can you explain this in detail with examples?

Teaching Concept

1. What do you think of rural music education?
2. What's your teaching philosophy for your rural students?
3. As a music teacher, what are your career goals? What kind of value do you want to achieve? Could you achieve it in reality? Why?
4. What is the value of music? Please give examples.
5. What is the value of music for your rural students?
6. What do you think is the role and function of music education in the whole educational system? Please give examples.

7. What do you think is the role of elementary music learning in the student's overall learning experiences? What is the impact of music on students? Short-term and long-term? Please give examples.
8. What are the unique benefits of music education for at-risk children? Please give examples.

Advantages and Challenges

1. What advantages have you experienced as a rural elementary general music teacher? What do you think the reasons are?
2. What challenges have you experienced as a rural elementary general music teacher? What do you think the reasons are?
3. What do you think is the biggest challenge at the moment? How could you improve it?
4. What aspects of the job are you satisfied with, and what aspects are you dissatisfied with?
 - Are you satisfied with your salary?
 - Are you satisfied with your living quality?
 - Are you satisfied with the current status of music lessons?
 - Do you feel support from other teachers, your schools, and the community?
5. What is the strongest impetus for your career?
6. Previously, you described how to get along with students. What is the impact of students on you?
 - What do you ultimately want to accomplish with your students?
 - In what ways have the students changed during the years? Have you noticed any trends over the years?

7. What is the trend of music education development? The reason?
8. What do you think are the key factors affecting rural music education?
 - The key factors for your career development.
 - Could you anticipate the development of rural music education in the future?
9. What are your suggestions for rural music education?
10. What's your future plan? Do you still want to be in this position?
11. If you had another chance to choose again, would you still choose to be a country music teacher? Why?
12. Which aspects of this study did you find most engaging, thought-provoking, and/or enjoyable? Why?
13. Is there anything I didn't ask you about the topics of this interview that you think I should consider?

Appendix F

Questions for the Semi-structured Interview with the Curriculum Director

- What do you think of music education in your county?
- What are the advantages and challenges? What do you think about the reason for that?
- What are the trends for music education?
- What is the value of music education in rural areas?
- Are there any differences in music education from region to region? And what is the reason for that?
- What factors do you think are critical for the development of local music education?
- What aspects of the job are you satisfied with, and what aspects are you dissatisfied with?
- (Salary, living quality, music education's current status, and community support).
- What do you think is the biggest challenge at the moment? How could you improve it?
- What is your future plan?
- If you could go back to the beginning of your career, what suggestions would you give yourself?
- What are your suggestions for rural music education?