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Original Paper

Dilemmas and Breakthroughs in Non-Core Subject Teaching in Rural Chinese Primary Schools Under the Shadow of Exam-Oriented Education

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Abstract

When examination scores and school rankings dominate educational evaluation, music, art, physical education, science, and ethics and rule of law in rural primary schools are relegated to "minor" or non-core status. Drawing on teaching practicum reports and supplementary interviews in Teaching Practicum Activity Summary: Rural Schools Edition (2019–2020), this study combines literature review, purposive sampling, and thematic analysis to examine the dilemmas of non-core subject teaching under examination pressure and their underlying mechanisms. The analysis identifies five mutually reinforcing problems: displacement of scheduled lessons, specialist teacher shortages and misallocation, idle facilities with inspection-oriented paperwork, rote or unstructured teaching, and low perceived subject value among students and families. They arise not from scarce resources alone but from the interplay of score-based incentives, staffing organized around tested subjects, document-centered governance, internalized curriculum hierarchies, and reliance on short-term teaching placements as substitutes for sustainable provision. Counterexamples involving scientific inquiry, choral singing, textbook-based drama, and physical activities suggest improvement requires guaranteed curriculum implementation, county-level specialist-teacher coordination, low-cost practice-rich pedagogy, performance-based assessment, professional learning communities, and stronger home–school understanding of curriculum value. The paper argues against raising their status through high-stakes examinations; governance should instead center on students' entitlement to actual lessons and meaningful learning.

Keywords

rural primary schools, non-core subject teaching, exam-oriented education, curriculum implementation, educational evaluation, teaching practicum

1. Introduction

Compulsory education carries a public responsibility for students' holistic development. China's Compulsory Education Curriculum Plan (2022 Edition) includes ethics and rule of law, science, physical education and health, and the arts within the national curriculum, and emphasizes core competencies, practical engagement, and integration (Ministry of Education [MOE], 2022). Music, art, physical education, science, and moral education are therefore not residual time after allegedly more important lessons. They provide essential opportunities for children's physical, aesthetic, investigative, social, and civic development. This paper retains the "core/non-core" distinction used in the practicum records as a practice-based concept for analyzing curriculum hierarchies. It is not an official classification and does not imply that these subjects have less educational value.

Legal status in curriculum documents, however, does not automatically translate into status in everyday classrooms. When schools demonstrate their performance primarily through scores in Chinese, mathematics, and English and through regional rankings, instructional time, strong teachers, and managerial attention may concentrate on subjects that generate rapidly comparable results. Rural schools also face constraints associated with small enrollments, multi-subject teaching assignments, and unstable external support. Non-core subjects consequently become a point at which several pressures converge. Attributing their marginalization simply to backward teacher attitudes or inadequate facilities cannot explain why some comparatively well-equipped schools still do not teach these subjects, or why particular lessons reappear only when short-term student teachers arrive.

This paper addresses three questions. First, what dilemmas in non-core subject teaching are represented in the practicum records? Second, how are these dilemmas jointly produced by evaluation, resource allocation, governance, and cultural mechanisms? Third, what feasible pathways can improve provision without reproducing exam-oriented logic? The aim is to develop a mechanism-based explanation and an improvement framework, not to estimate the national prevalence of the problems identified.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Examination-Based Evaluation and Curriculum Hierarchies

Exam-oriented education involves more than excessive test preparation. It converts comparable scores into a central signal pursued by schools, teachers, and students. Research on China's National Assessment of Education Quality demonstrates that physical education and the arts can be incorporated into a broader conception of educational quality; quality need not be reduced to paper-and-pencil achievement in a small number of subjects (Jiang et al., 2019). Yet where easily ranked scores become the primary basis of local accountability, schools have a rational incentive to redirect resources toward content that yields rapid and visible gains. Liu and Onwuegbuzie's (2012) study of Chinese teachers' work stress also links heavy workloads, student behavior, and occupational strain. This organizational context helps explain why teachers of tested subjects may take over non-core lessons and why teachers may lack time to develop practice-based curricula.

2.2 Staffing, Professional Expertise, and Implementation Gaps in Rural Schools

Research on music education reveals tensions among curriculum standards, teachers' professional expertise, and local implementation conditions. Yu and Leung (2019) show that implementing curriculum standards requires professional understanding and contextual support rather than policy texts alone. Yang and Welch's (2023) systematic review of Chinese music education research further identifies urban–rural disparities, teacher retention, and professionalization as persistent concerns. The central issue in rural non-core subjects is therefore not merely whether a staffing position exists. It also concerns whether teachers possess subject knowledge, can organize practical activities, and receive sustained professional support. When non-specialist teachers reduce science to memorizing answers or treat music, art, and physical education as unstructured recreation, these practices should not be interpreted solely as individual failures. They must also be understood in relation to weaknesses in preparation, deployment, and ongoing support.

2.3 Possibilities Under Resource Constraints and the Remaining Research Gap

Limited resources do not necessarily preclude meaningful improvement. Sargent and Hannum's (2009) study of professional learning communities in resource-constrained rural Chinese primary schools shows how collaborative planning, peer learning, and a school's professional culture can build the capacity to "do more with less." The 2020 national policy on aesthetic education likewise calls for full curriculum provision, interschool teacher sharing, itinerant teaching, synchronized online classrooms, and university-supported aesthetic education initiatives (General Office of the CPC Central Committee & General Office of the State Council, 2020). Existing studies provide important accounts of evaluation and staffing, but less often connect timetable displacement, idle facilities, retrospective paperwork, student-teacher substitution, and students' attitudes within a single explanatory chain. This paper addresses that connection through cross-case textual analysis and treats students' actual learning experiences, rather than course labels or facility counts, as its central concern.

3. Method

3.1 Research Design and Materials

The study uses an interpretive qualitative design combining a literature review with documentary analysis. Its core source is the user-provided Teaching Practicum Activity Summary: Rural Schools Edition, which contains 110 practicum reports, some accompanied by supplementary interviews. The records were produced mainly in 2019–2020 and primarily concern teaching placements in rural schools in Shandong Province, China. After an initial reading of the full corpus, purposive sampling selected records that explicitly concerned rural primary schools and addressed at least one aspect of non-core curriculum provision, staffing, resources, classroom teaching, or evaluation. Secondary-school records and passages dealing only with accommodation or interpersonal adjustment, without curricular information, were excluded from focused coding.

For cross-document citation, the selected records were renumbered C01, C02, and so forth for this paper. Student names, identification numbers, and specific school names were not retained. Policy and academic literature were used for conceptual comparison and interpretation, not as substitutes for case evidence. Policies issued after 2020 serve only as normative reference points for improvement; they are not used to describe the institutional context at the time of the records or to claim that the same problems remain widespread today.

3.2 Analytical Procedures

Analysis proceeded in three stages. First, open coding identified meaning units such as “music and art replaced by Chinese,” “special rooms opened only for inspections,” “non-specialists teaching science,” and “non-core lessons used to supervise homework.” Second, focused coding grouped these units into six categories: curriculum time, teacher expertise, resource use, pedagogy, evaluation and governance, and perceptions of curriculum value. Third, cross-case comparison examined variations in similar phenomena and identified counterexamples, including a compass experiment, paper pinwheel construction, choral singing, textbook-based drama, sports meets, and recess dance. These comparisons supported an explanatory chain linking dilemmas, mechanisms, and possible breakthroughs.

3.3 Trustworthiness, Ethics, and Limitations

Trustworthiness was strengthened by comparing practicum reports with supplementary interviews, contrasting problematic and constructive cases, and triangulating the records with published literature. Case presentation retains only curriculum-related facts relevant to the research questions, removes identifying information, and does not treat moral judgments in self-reports as independently verified facts. The materials are retrospective accounts written by student teachers and may be shaped by their disciplinary backgrounds, classroom experience, and narrative purposes. The study involved no direct classroom observation and no systematic interviews with principals, regular teachers, students, or parents. It therefore reports no prevalence estimates, does not generalize individual cases to rural China as a whole, and does not evaluate the performance of any particular school. Its conclusions constitute analytic generalization and require further testing through contemporary, multi-site observations and interviews.

4. Major Dilemmas

4.1 Subjects Offered on Paper but Absent in Practice

The most prominent dilemma is the reassignment of lessons that formally appear on the timetable. Numerous records describe music and art being replaced by Chinese, music, art, and physical education yielding to tested subjects, and science and ethics being taught rarely, if at all. Some classes received little beyond Chinese, mathematics, and limited English. Elsewhere, courses such as traditional culture or information technology appeared in documentation, but their classroom function was to supervise students completing Chinese or mathematics homework. Lesson displacement was thus not merely an occasional scheduling conflict; it reflected a stable arrangement in which non-core subjects served as

flexible reserves of instructional time (Teaching Practicum Activity Summary, 2019–2020, Cases C02, C07, C11, & C16). This arrangement was especially easy to justify in graduating classes, before examinations, or when teachers were absent.

4.2 The Compounding Effects of Teacher Shortages and Deprofessionalization

The records reveal both quantitative shortages and misallocation. Some schools had no specialist teachers in music, art, or physical education; elsewhere, teachers trained in physical education or art were assigned to Chinese or mathematics. More commonly, one teacher taught a core subject while also covering non-core lessons for several classes. Student teachers were frequently concentrated in non-core assignments, and some students specializing in Chinese were required to teach science, music, or information technology while learning the content themselves. Shortage therefore did not automatically lead to professional supplementation. Instead, it produced an allocation order in which stronger teachers were reserved for core subjects and non-core subjects absorbed the remaining labor (Teaching Practicum Activity Summary, 2019–2020, Cases C03, C08, & C12).

Non-specialist assignment directly constrained instructional depth. Student teachers could lead song imitation, basic formations, or drawing tasks but found it difficult to provide sustained guidance in artistic performance. They could explain scientific concepts from teaching guides but were not necessarily able to design inquiry activities or diagnose misconceptions. Without observation, mentoring, and subject-based professional development, non-core lessons could easily become little more than supervised use of scheduled time.

4.3 Visible Facilities but Ineffective Resource Use

Several records describe a striking contradiction. Schools possessed music rooms, art rooms, laboratories, computer rooms, pianos, or sports facilities, yet students rarely used them. Some special rooms were opened mainly for official inspections, while usage logs and lesson plans for courses never actually taught were completed retrospectively by teachers or student teachers. Facility counts therefore cannot serve as evidence of curriculum access. The conversion of resources into learning depends on specialist expertise, timetabling, managerial responsibility, and maintenance. Document-centered inspection could further consume teachers' time, allowing proof that lessons had occurred to displace the work of teaching them well (Teaching Practicum Activity Summary, 2019–2020, Cases C02, C06, & C10).

4.4 Rote Teaching, Recreation, and Curriculum Marginalization

Exam-oriented logic not only reduces the time allocated to non-core subjects; it can also transform the pedagogy of those that remain. In some schools, science and ethics and society were taught primarily through memorizing facts and test answers, displacing experiments, discussion, and social experience. In other classrooms, music, art, and physical education were understood chiefly as relaxation after academic work and were reduced to song imitation, free drawing, or unstructured activity. The first pattern makes non-core subjects resemble tested subjects; the second removes their curricular substance.

Both weaken the distinctive forms of learning and educational purposes associated with each subject (Teaching Practicum Activity Summary, 2019–2020, Cases C01 & C09).

4.5 A Cycle of Low Student Expectations and Classroom Management Difficulties

A prolonged lack of stable provision shapes students' expectations. Some students in the records described music and art as uninteresting and preferable to replace with Chinese, while others chose to remain in classrooms doing homework during physical education. In contrast, students who regained ethics, music, or experimental science lessons often displayed novelty and enthusiasm. The claim that students simply dislike non-core subjects is therefore inadequate. Their preferences may reflect limited prior experience, discontinuous learning, and the value signals sent by schools. Meanwhile, non-core teachers often possessed less authority and found activity-based lessons harder to manage, encouraging a retreat into either lecturing or laissez-faire supervision and further reducing learning quality (Teaching Practicum Activity Summary, 2019–2020, Cases C02, C05, & C14).

5. Causes

5.1 Score Rankings Lock Schools into Short-Term, Visible Achievement

In the records, township examinations, class rankings, teacher rewards, and school reputations were interconnected. Examination results affected both external evaluations of schools and internal assessments of teachers. Accelerating syllabus coverage, repeated test practice, and the displacement of non-counted lessons therefore became predictable organizational choices. Even when science and ethics were examined, teaching could still turn toward memorization because high-stakes evaluation rewarded rapidly standardized answers rather than time-intensive inquiry. The central problem is not assessment itself but the disproportionate weight of a narrow score in resource allocation and accountability.

5.2 Staffing Around Tested Subjects Produces Structural Shortages

Rural schools are often small and serve dispersed classes. If resource planning assumes that every school should independently employ a full specialist in every subject, positions in music, art, physical education, and science are difficult to sustain. At the same time, heavy marking, teaching, and inspection workloads in core subjects encourage schools to retain versatile and high-performing teachers in those assignments. Multi-subject teaching may cover the timetable, but without corresponding training and workload recognition it leaves non-core subjects at the bottom of professional development priorities.

5.3 Document-Centered Inspection Weakens Responsibility for Implementation

When inspection focuses primarily on lesson plans, registers, and exercise books, schools can satisfy formal requirements by retrospectively producing documents without demonstrating that students actually conducted experiments, participated in the arts, or engaged in physical activity. Idle facilities and complete paperwork can consequently coexist. Such governance also creates additional work: time that could be used for planning and professional collaboration is diverted into documentation, further

weakening curriculum quality. Formalism is not merely an isolated problem of work style; it is a predictable substitute behavior when indicators become detached from students' learning processes.

5.4 Curriculum Value Signals Are Reproduced in Schools and Families

Schools repeatedly communicate which lessons matter through their actions. When teachers and parents focus mainly on Chinese, mathematics, and English results, students learn to regard non-core subjects as expendable, recreational, or useful only for examination bonuses. Limited educational engagement among some families may affect participation, but responsibility should not be shifted entirely onto rural parents. Schools themselves send powerful signals through lesson displacement, seating, rewards, sanctions, and staffing decisions. Low student expectations are thus better understood as products of institutional experience than as evidence that rural children naturally lack needs or interests in art, movement, or inquiry.

5.5 Short-Term Placements Mask the Absence of Sustainable Provision

Teaching placements can rapidly introduce lessons, activities, and new relationships, but their temporary character creates additional problems. Schools may assign student teachers independent responsibility for demanding subjects while moving regular teachers back to tested subjects; provision may then stop when the placement ends. Some student teachers lacked subject preparation and classroom management support, experiencing both growth and frustration. When placements become a routine solution to staffing shortages, a cycle emerges in which courses operate when temporary teachers arrive and disappear when they leave. Neither stable school-based curricula nor durable teacher expertise can accumulate under these conditions.

6. Pathways to Breakthrough

6.1 Make Actual Curriculum Delivery the Non-Negotiable Basis of Accountability

County education authorities and schools should treat implementation of the national curriculum as a basic entitlement that cannot be casually surrendered. A lightweight monitoring system should cross-check timetables, teacher assignments, samples of student work or activity records, and confidential student interviews. Lesson displacement, long-term non-provision, and fabricated documentation should trigger clearly assigned corrective responsibilities. Where lessons are moved before examinations, replacement teaching and public explanation should be required. Inspection should not demand additional portfolios of paperwork; it should use random lesson visits, sampled student interviews, and direct review of work to verify actual learning experiences. The core competencies and practical orientation emphasized by MOE (2022) become meaningful only when translated into instructional time and student activity.

6.2 Coordinate Specialist Staffing and Workloads at County Level

Small schools should not each bear the impossible task of maintaining a complete specialist staffing structure. Counties or township central schools can establish shared pools of music, art, physical education, and science teachers, using scheduled itinerant teaching, cross-school timetables, and joint

professional development. Synchronized online teaching should supplement, not replace, specialist support, with local teachers organizing practical work and feedback. Itinerant teaching, club supervision, and cross-school preparation should count toward workloads and performance assessments. Recruitment and targeted teacher preparation should respond to actual subject shortages, while specialist teachers should be protected from long-term reassignment to tested subjects. Student teachers may contribute under supervision but should not independently substitute for required staffing. The interschool sharing, itinerant teaching, and university support advocated in the 2020 aesthetic education policy provide a policy direction for this mechanism (General Office of the CPC Central Committee & General Office of the State Council, 2020).

6.3 Develop Low-Cost, Practice-Rich, and Sustainable Lessons

Improvement need not begin with expensive equipment; it should begin by restoring each subject's indispensable modes of learning. Science lessons can use magnets, basins, and foam to conduct compass experiments organized around prediction, manipulation, observation, and explanation. Art can draw on paper folding, local objects, and village landscapes to develop representation and expression. Music can use choral singing, rhythm, and local melodies to establish continuing practice. Physical education can combine fundamental fitness, cooperative games, and regular class-level participation. Ethics and rule of law can address real school incidents through discussion, role play, and collaborative rule-making. The paper pinwheels, textbook-based drama, recess dance, and sports meets in the records demonstrate that active participation is possible with limited resources. Interdisciplinary projects may share tasks, but a single integrated event should not replace continuous and progressive learning in each subject.

6.4 Use Performance-Based Assessment Rather Than Re-Examining Non-Core Subjects

Raising the status of non-core subjects does not require additional standardized written examinations. Schools can maintain concise learning portfolios containing experiment records, progress in movement skills, artistic practice and products, collaboration, and reflection. Assessment should use classroom observation, live tasks, exhibitions, and student self- and peer assessment, emphasizing growth and participation rather than one-off rankings. County-level monitoring can sample access to learning opportunities and basic competencies without converting results directly into high-stakes comparisons among schools. Teacher evaluation should similarly move from the number of lesson-plan pages toward actual teaching, student engagement, and professional improvement. These approaches make learning visible without returning non-core subjects to the memorization of standardized answers.

6.5 Support Non-Specialist Teachers Through Professional Learning Communities

Teachers working outside their specialisms need short-cycle but continuous subject-based development. Training should center on authentic lesson cases through collaborative planning, trial teaching, observation, and reflection rather than policy lectures alone. Specialist teachers in central schools can form subject communities with village-school teachers, while universities can support curriculum design, laboratory safety, and artistic practice. Sargent and Hannum (2009) demonstrate the

professional value of peer collaboration in resource-constrained schools. For student teachers, universities and placement schools should implement dual mentoring and clearly define the teaching responsibilities they can safely assume. Being able to occupy a classroom should not be confused with being able to teach any subject independently and well.

6.6 Rebuild Home–School Understanding Through Visible Student Growth

Schools should use open days, exhibitions of student work, class-based physical activities, and explanations of inquiry tasks to clarify the purposes of non-core learning. Families should be able to observe changes in confidence, cooperation, health, aesthetic perception, and problem solving. For children whose parents work away from home, brief written messages, voice notes, or labels accompanying displayed work can reduce communication barriers; frequent attendance at school events should not be a prerequisite for parental engagement. Schools should also reduce notices and awards that treat examination scores as the only worthwhile achievement, ensuring consistency in curriculum value signals. The purpose of home–school cooperation is not to require additional spending on private training but to protect every child's access to a complete curriculum at school.

7. Conclusion

The difficulties documented in the practicum records constitute a mechanism-based problem produced jointly by exam-oriented evaluation, staffing arrangements, formalistic governance, and the internalization of curriculum hierarchies. Lesson displacement, idle facilities, non-specialist teaching, and low student expectations are not isolated conditions; they reinforce one another. The counterexamples also demonstrate children's genuine engagement with experiments, the arts, and physical activity, showing that limited resources do not inevitably produce poor curricula. The key breakthrough is not to transform non-core subjects into another arena of score competition but to restore their practical, continuous, and professional character. Actual curriculum delivery must be the bottom line, supported by county-level staffing coordination and professional learning communities, with performance-based assessment and home–school understanding providing further guarantees. Only then can holistic development become a sustainable learning experience for rural children rather than remaining policy language. These conclusions are bounded by the records' date, geographic concentration, and self-report format. Future research should use contemporary classroom observation and multi-stakeholder interviews to examine implementation changes across regions.

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