

# The Role of Arts Education in Preserving Traditional Folk Music in Guizhou, China

Hao Ni

(Associate Professor, Shanghai Urban Construction Vocational College, School of Architecture and Environmental Arts, Shanghai, China)

**Abstract:** Introduction: Guizhou Province in southwest China is renowned for its rich traditions of folk music, particularly among ethnic communities such as the Dong and Yi. These musical forms serve as cultural archives, transmitting oral history, identity, and communal values. However, modernization, urban migration, and the rise of globalized entertainment threaten their continuity. In response, arts education has been identified as a potential mechanism for preserving this intangible cultural heritage. Purpose: This study investigates how arts education contributes to the preservation of traditional folk music in Guizhou, with emphasis on school-community collaboration, curriculum integration, and intergenerational learning. Methodology: Using a mixed-methods design, the study involved two focus group discussions with 12 educators and cultural practitioners, and a structured survey administered to 200 secondary school students. Qualitative data were analyzed thematically, while quantitative data were examined using descriptive statistics, Pearson's correlation, and linear regression. Results: Qualitative analysis revealed three key themes. First, school-based exposure to traditional music enhanced students' cultural awareness and musical literacy. Second, intergenerational learning and community engagement enriched educational experiences through direct contact with traditional bearers. Third, implementation challenges were reported, including inadequate teacher training and a lack of culturally relevant materials. Quantitative findings indicated moderate exposure to traditional music ( $M = 24.00$ ,  $SD = 10.10$ ) and cultural identity ( $M = 26.01$ ,  $SD = 9.85$ ), but no significant correlation between the two variables ( $r = -0.05$ ,  $p = .46$ ), suggesting exposure alone may not predict identity development. Conclusion: While arts education offers potential for cultural preservation, its effectiveness depends on pedagogical depth, community collaboration, and institutional support to ensure the sustainability and transmission of intangible musical heritage.

**Keywords:** Arts Education, Folk Music Preservation, Intangible Cultural Heritage, Guizhou Province, Cultural Identity

# 1 Introduction

Guizhou Province, located in southwest China, is distinguished by its remarkable ethnic and cultural diversity, particularly evident in its rich traditions of folk music. These musical expressions are not merely artistic performances but serve as vital conduits for oral history, cultural memory, and identity among the region's ethnic groups, such as the Dong and Yi communities. For instance, the Shan'ge folk songs of the Yi people are historically used to transmit cultural rituals and communal narratives across generations, while the Dong Grand Songs, characterized by complex polyphonic structures, are considered an essential element of the Dong people's intangible cultural heritage (Huang et al., 2024), [1] These musical traditions are emblematic of Guizhou's diverse cultural landscape and continue to serve as living archives of community values and historical continuity.

However, the survival of these traditions is increasingly under threat due to the forces of rapid urbanization, socioeconomic transformation, and the pervasive influence of globalized entertainment. As young people migrate to urban centers and become immersed in digital cultures that prioritize popular music and homogenized media content, traditional musical forms risk being forgotten. Furthermore, the aging population of traditional bearers and the declining interest among younger generations exacerbate this cultural vulnerability. Within this context, arts education has emerged as a promising strategy for cultural preservation. By embedding traditional music into formal educational curricula and facilitating intergenerational transmission through school-community collaboration, arts education not only enhances musical literacy but also strengthens students' understanding and appreciation of their cultural roots.

Recent efforts in Guizhou reflect this growing recognition of the role of education in safeguarding intangible cultural heritage. Primary and secondary schools in the region have initiated programs to integrate folk music, such as the Dong Grand Songs and Shan'ge, into their teaching content. These efforts have been shown to enrich students' artistic competencies while reinforcing a sense of cultural identity and belonging [1] (Huang et al., 2024). Complementing these institutional initiatives are community-based learning models in which students engage directly with local musicians and cultural custodians. These models not only promote experiential learning but also reinforce cultural authenticity by preserving the oral and performative dimensions of folk traditions (Liu et al., 2024).

Community engagement and intergenerational learning have been widely recognized as essential pillars for preserving traditional folk music, particularly in ethnically diverse regions. Research shows that the effective transmission of intangible cultural heritage often arises through collaborative networks involving schools, families, local musicians, and governmental or cultural institutions [2], [3]. Community-driven initiatives such as cultural festivals, workshops, and extracurricular folk music programs serve as platforms for elders to pass down oral traditions to younger generations, fostering both musical competence and a shared cultural identity [3]. Informal learning practices especially within family and village settings, have proven particularly impactful, as demonstrated in studies of the Poya and Elunchun

communities, where folk musicians act as cultural custodians and key facilitators of community-based education [2], [4]. Moreover, the integration of digital tools, online archives, and virtual platforms has expanded access to traditional music, helping ensure cultural continuity and relevance for younger generations [5]. Collectively, these multidimensional strategies not only help safeguard musical heritage but also strengthen community cohesion and promote sustainable models for intergenerational transmission.

Moreover, in response to the evolving digital landscape and shifting youth interests, educators and cultural advocates have begun leveraging modern technology to enhance the appeal and accessibility of traditional music. Digital archiving, interactive media, and online platforms are increasingly used to document and disseminate regional folk songs, enabling broader engagement and long-term preservation [6]. These digital tools serve not only as repositories but also as innovative pedagogical resources that bridge traditional knowledge with contemporary learning styles.

Nevertheless, the preservation of folk music in Guizhou through arts education is not without its challenges. The lack of culturally responsive curricula, insufficient teacher training, and limited institutional support often hinder implementation. Additionally, the dominance of commercial media continues to marginalize traditional art forms in the eyes of younger audiences. Addressing these issues requires a multifaceted strategy that combines curriculum reform, community engagement, technological integration, and policy support. Thus, this article therefore aims to examine the role of arts education in preserving traditional folk music in Guizhou, exploring both the strategies employed and the challenges encountered. By synthesizing qualitative and quantitative findings, the study offers insights into how educational institutions, communities, and digital platforms can collaborate to sustain the region's musical heritage. In doing so, it contributes to broader discussions on the intersection of education, cultural sustainability, and the preservation of intangible heritage in rapidly changing societies.

## 2 Methodology

This study adopted a mixed-methods research design, combining qualitative and quantitative approaches to achieve a comprehensive understanding of the role of arts education in preserving traditional folk music in Guizhou, China.

### 2.1 Phase I (Qualitative Component): To Explore Stakeholder Perspectives

The qualitative strand of the study sought to explore the lived experiences, practices, and perceptions of individuals directly involved in traditional music education and cultural policy-making. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select 20 participants, comprising 10 arts educators, 6 traditional folk musicians, and 4 local cultural policymakers. Participants were selected based on their active involvement in folk music education, heritage preservation, or community engagement in Guizhou Province.

Data collection was conducted through two focus group discussions (FGD) session, allowing for in-depth exploration of themes such as curricular integration, pedagogical approaches, barriers to implementation, and the perceived value of cultural transmission. Each FGD session lasted approximately 45 to 90 minutes and was conducted in Mandarin or local dialects with the assistance of a trained interpreter when necessary. All sessions were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using thematic analysis in Atlas.Ti. The codes were generated inductively, and themes were reviewed iteratively to ensure accuracy and coherence.

## 2.2 Phase II (Quantitative Component): To Examine the Relationship Between Exposure and Cultural Identity

As for the quantitative component, a structured questionnaire was administered to 200 secondary school students, aged 13 to 17, selected from four districts in Guizhou Province. To ensure representation of Guizhou's socio-geographic diversity, a stratified random sampling method was used. Stratification was informed by urban population sizes and school distributions across prefecture-level cities as reported in official population statistics (2020). The sample was proportionally drawn from four major urban districts namely Guiyang, Zunyi, Bijie, and Anshun, which collectively represent significant demographic and cultural variability in the province. These cities were selected due to their varied levels of urbanization, ethnic diversity, and access to arts education infrastructure. Guiyang and Zunyi were chosen to represent highly urbanized areas with larger populations and well-established educational systems. In contrast, Bijie and Anshun were included to reflect semi-urban and rural settings where traditional music and cultural practices remain actively rooted in the community. By selecting these four districts, the sample captured a balanced mix of urban and rural perspectives, aligning with the study's goal to reflect the cultural and geographic diversity of Guizhou Province.

The instrument was constructed using validated and adapted items drawn from two established sources, the Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure-Revised (MEIM-R) developed by Phinney [7] and revised by Roberts et al. [8], and UNESCO's indicators for measuring cultural participation [10]. The questionnaire consisted of three main sections: demographic information, exposure to traditional folk music through arts education, and students' sense of cultural identity as shown in Table 1.

A pilot study involving 30 students was conducted to assess the reliability and clarity of the questionnaire. Based on the pilot, several linguistic modifications were made to enhance readability. The final instrument achieved a Cronbach's alpha of 0.84, indicating strong internal consistency.

Table 1: Structure and Domains of the Questionnaire on Arts Education and Cultural Identity

Secti on	Domain	No. of Ite ms	Example Items	Source
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I	Student Demographic Profile	5	Age, gender, ethnicity, location, school type	Self-developed
II	Exposure to Traditional Folk Music	8	"I have learned traditional folk songs at school." "My school hosts folk music workshops."	Adapted from UNESCO (2012) [10] Cultural Participation Indicators
III	Cultural Identity and Heritage Connection	8	"I feel proud of my cultural background." "Traditional music helps me feel connected to my community."	Adapted from MEIM-R (Roberts et al., 1999; Phinney, 1992) [8], [7]

The questionnaire employed a 5-point Likert scale for all items in Sections II and III, with response options ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). For each respondent, the total scores from Section II (Exposure to Traditional Folk Music) and Section III (Cultural Identity and Heritage Connection) were computed by summing the item responses and then averaging them to generate two composite variables. These variables were labeled as the Exposure Score and the Cultural Identity Score, each with a possible range from 8 to 40. Higher scores indicated greater exposure to traditional folk music through arts education and stronger identification with cultural heritage, respectively. Survey data were analyzed using SPSS Version 26, applying descriptive statistics, Pearson's correlation, and linear regression analysis to examine the relationship between exposure to traditional music through arts education and students' cultural identity scores.

## 2.3 Ethical Considerations

All participants were provided with an informed consent form outlining the study's purpose, their rights, and data confidentiality. For student participants, parental or guardian consent was also secured in compliance with ethical standards for research involving minors. Participation was voluntary, and participants were allowed to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. Data was anonymized to protect personal identities, and all recordings and transcripts were securely stored in password-protected files accessible only to the research team.

## 3 Results

### 3.1 Qualitative Findings: Exploring Stakeholder Perspectives

To contextualize the qualitative findings and gain insight into stakeholder perspectives, two focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted with 12 participants from four selected districts. Participants were purposively selected to ensure representation across a diverse range of roles, including arts educators, music teachers, traditional musicians, and cultural program leaders. All participants had relevant experience in folk music education or cultural heritage preservation. Their institutional affiliations included schools, community ensembles, cultural organizations, and local government bodies. Table 2 presents the demographic profile of the FGD participants, detailing their roles, district affiliations, and years of experience.

Table 2: Demographic Profile of Focus Group Discussion (FGD) Participants (N = 12)

Participant ID	Role	District	Affiliation	Years of Experience
P1	Arts Educator	Guiyang	Secondary School	12
P2	Cultural Practitioner	Guiyang	Local Cultural Center	20
P3	Music Teacher	Zunyi	Middle School	8
P4	Traditional Musician	Zunyi	Community Ensemble	25
P5	Arts Educator	Bijie	Rural School	10
P6	Ethnic Music Specialist	Bijie	Cultural NGO	18
P7	Music Teacher	Anshun	Secondary School	6
P8	Folk Song Performer	Anshun	Independent Practitioner	15
P9	Curriculum Officer	Guiyang	District Education Bureau	11
P10	Music Educator	Zunyi	Teacher Training College	14
P11	Cultural Researcher	Bijie	University Arts Department	9
P12	Heritage Program Leader	Anshun	Cultural Preservation Council	22

### Thematic Analysis and Coding Process

Thematic analysis was used to analyse data from the two focus group discussions (Table 3). Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach, the transcripts were reviewed multiple times to familiarize the researcher with the content, after which initial codes were generated. Coding was conducted inductively, allowing themes to

emerge naturally from the data rather than imposing predefined categories. In the initial coding phase, statements were coded based on shared meanings and relevance to the research objectives. Codes were then grouped into subthemes that reflected recurring patterns, concerns, or perspectives. For example, mentions of students feeling proud of their heritage after participating in folk music activities were grouped under a subtheme of "cultural pride and identity formation." Similarly, discussions around teaching challenges formed a subtheme on "resource and training constraints." After reviewing and refining the subthemes, three main themes were identified to capture the overarching patterns across both FGDs. These themes are presented in Table 4, along with representative key findings and supporting sources.

Table 3: Thematic Analysis of FGD Data

Initial Codes	Subthemes	Final Themes
Students express pride in cultural songs	Cultural pride and identity formation	Cultural Awareness and Musical Literacy
Improved understanding of traditional instruments	Music literacy and skill development	Cultural Awareness and Musical Literacy
Class performances increase engagement	Classroom engagement through traditional music	Cultural Awareness and Musical Literacy
Workshops with community musicians	Community-based music instruction	Community Engagement and Intergenerational Learning
Cultural storytelling in classroom	Intergenerational cultural transmission	Community Engagement and Intergenerational Learning
Lack of teacher training in folk music	Training gaps for teachers	Barriers to Implementation
No teaching materials for regional music	Insufficient instructional resources	Barriers to Implementation
Folk music excluded from school curriculum	Curriculum exclusion of local culture	Barriers to Implementation

### Emerging Themes and Key Findings

The three major themes derived from the analysis are presented in Table 4. Each theme is supported by direct insights from participants and linked to relevant literature.

Table 4: Themes and Key Findings from Focus Group Discussions

Theme	Key Findings	Supporting Sources
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Theme	Key Findings	Supporting Sources
Cultural Awareness and Musical Literacy	Students exposed to folk music through school programs demonstrated increased pride in their cultural identity, improved musical understanding, and stronger emotional connections to heritage.	Tang & Phaengsoi (2024); (Chen, Choatchamrat, & Chuangprakhon, 2024). [1], [5]
Community Engagement and Intergenerational Learning	Collaboration with community elders and musicians—such as hosting workshops and cultural events—enhanced student learning, provided context-rich exposure, and supported oral transmission of songs and stories.	(Tang & Othman, 2023; Wang & Woramitmaitree, 2024) [2], [3]
Barriers to Implementation	Participants highlighted significant limitations, including lack of culturally trained music educators, inadequate teaching materials on folk traditions, and minimal integration of local music into national curricula.	(Yang, 2022) [9]

### 3.2 Quantitative Findings: The Relationship Between Exposure and Cultural Identity

#### Demographic Profile

A total of 200 secondary school students from four districts in Guizhou participated in the survey. The sample reflected diversity across gender, location, and ethnicity. Slightly more participants identified as female than male. Most respondents attended urban schools, with additional representation from semi-urban and rural areas. The largest ethnic group was Han, followed by Dong, Yi, and other minority communities. The participants were between 13 and 17 years old, with a mean age of approximately 15 years ( $M = 14.92$ ,  $SD = 1.44$ ). Table 5 presents a summary of participant characteristics.

Table 5: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents (N = 200)

Category		Percentage / Value
Gender	Female	51.0%
	Male	49.0%
Location	Urban	41.5%
	Rural	30.5%
	Semi-Urban	28.0%
Ethnicity	Han	34.5%
	Dong	31.0%
	Yi	25.0%
	Other	9.5%
Age	Range	13–17 years
	Mean (SD)	14.92 (1.44)

#### Student Exposure and Cultural Identity Levels

The findings indicate that students reported a moderate level of exposure to traditional folk music through arts education ( $M = 24.00$ ,  $SD = 10.10$ ), alongside a slightly higher average cultural identity score ( $M = 26.01$ ,  $SD = 9.85$ ). This suggests that while not all students had extensive engagement with traditional music in formal settings, many still demonstrated a sense of cultural identity. The difference in mean scores, combined with the relatively high standard deviations for both variables, reflects variability in students’ experiences and cultural connections.

Table 6: Descriptive Statistics for Exposure and Cultural Identity Scores (N = 200)

Variable	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)	Min	Max
Exposure Score	24.00	10.10	8	40
Cultural Identity Score	26.01	9.85	8	40

#### The Association Between Music Exposure and Cultural Identity

A Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationship between students’ reported exposure to traditional folk music and their self-identified sense of cultural identity. The results (Table 7) revealed a very weak and statistically non-significant negative correlation,  $r(198) = -0.05$ ,  $p = .46$ . This indicates that, within this sample, increased exposure to traditional music in school settings was not associated with a stronger cultural identity among students.

Table 7: Students Exposure to Traditional Music and Cultural Identity (N = 200)

Variable 1	Variable 2	r	p
Exposure Score	Cultural Identity Score	-0.05	.46

p<0.05

### Predictive Value of Exposure on Cultural Identity

A simple linear regression was conducted to examine whether exposure to traditional folk music through arts education predicted students' cultural identity scores. As shown in Table 8, the overall model was not statistically significant,  $F(1, 198) = 0.53$ ,  $p = .46$ . The regression coefficient for exposure was negative but not significant ( $B = -0.05$ ,  $p = .46$ ), with a 95% confidence interval ranging from  $-0.19$  to  $0.09$ . These results indicate that exposure to traditional music alone does not significantly predict students' cultural identity, suggesting that additional factors such as community involvement, personal interest, or familial influence and may play a more substantial role in shaping cultural identity outcomes.

Table 8: Predicting Cultural Identity from Exposure to Traditional Folk Music (N = 200)

Predictor	B	SE	t	p	95% CI for B
Intercept	27.23	1.80	15.12	< .001	[23.68, 30.78]
Exposure Score	-0.05	0.07	-0.73	.46	[-0.19, 0.09]

p<0.05

## 4 Discussion

The qualitative findings of this study offer critical insight into how arts education contributes to the preservation of traditional folk music in Guizhou, China. Three key themes emerged from the focus group discussions with educators, musicians, and cultural practitioners, namely cultural awareness and musical literacy, community engagement and intergenerational learning, and barriers to implementation. These themes align with existing studies and further enrich the discourse on music education, intergenerational cultural transmission, and intangible heritage preservation.

### 4.1 Cultural Awareness and Musical Literacy

The integration of traditional music into school curricula was perceived by participants as a meaningful way to foster cultural identity and enhance students' musical understanding. Educators noted that students exposed to folk songs such as Dong Grand Songs or Shan'ge developed a stronger emotional connection to their heritage, often expressing pride in performing culturally rooted music. This finding aligns with previous studies that highlight the educational value of culturally responsive teaching strategies in reinforcing both musical skills and self-identity [1], [5]. Similarly, research on the Sichuan Guzheng shows that traditional instruments serve

not only as tools for technical mastery but also as mediums for transmitting philosophical and historical knowledge, contributing to holistic cultural literacy [5]. These findings support the argument that music education is rooted in local culture can cultivate a sense of belonging and cultural continuity among learners.

### 4.2 Community Engagement and Intergenerational Learning

The second theme underscores the value of collaboration between schools and community cultural bearers. Participants emphasized that meaningful cultural learning occurs when students interact directly with traditional holders through storytelling, workshops, and live performances. These interactions not only facilitate experiential learning but also uphold the oral traditions that are often excluded from formal curricula. This finding supports Tang and Othman's [2] study on informal learning in Malaysia, which showed that community-based instruction by folk musicians played a key role in sustaining folk songs. Similarly, Wang and Woramitmaitree [3] emphasized how traditional boatman work songs could be leveraged as educational tools that link historical labor practices with modern literacy and cultural awareness. The present study affirms that such community engagement is essential for preserving the integrity of folk traditions while making them accessible and relevant to younger generations.

### 4.3 Barriers to Implementation

Despite these promising practices, participants also identified several structural and pedagogical barriers that hinder the effective integration of traditional music into arts education. These included the lack of culturally trained music educators, limited instructional resources tailored to folk traditions, and an overemphasis on standardized curricula that often marginalize local cultural content. These concerns mirror findings by Yang [9], who reported misalignment between national curriculum standards and the cultural realities of music instruction in Chinese schools. When traditional content is absent or treated as peripheral, students may disengage from their cultural roots, undermining the broader goals of heritage preservation. Moreover, the absence of sustained funding and institutional support further weakens school-community partnerships that are critical for cultural transmission. This suggests a need for policy-level interventions to ensure that arts education frameworks are not only inclusive of diverse cultural content but also supported by adequate training and resources.

As for the quantitative findings of this study aimed to examine the relationship between students' exposure to traditional folk music through arts education and their self-perceived cultural identity. Although students demonstrated moderate levels of both exposure and cultural identity, statistical analyses revealed no significant relationship between the two constructs. Specifically, the Pearson correlation was weak and non-significant ( $r = -0.05$ ,  $p = .46$ ), and the linear regression model failed to predict cultural identity scores based on exposure

levels alone ( $p = .46$ ). Therefore, these findings stand in contrast to prior research that emphasizes the importance of arts education in shaping students' cultural identity and self-concept. For example, Tang and Phaengsoi [1] found that students involved in structured traditional music education, particularly in programs featuring Dong Grand Songs, reported a heightened sense of cultural pride and identity. Similarly, Chen, Choatchamrat, and Chuangprakhon [5] documented how the study of the Sichuan Guzheng not only enhanced musical literacy but also deepened learners' connection to their cultural roots.

However, the discrepancy in this study's results may be attributed to several factors. First, exposure alone is measured as frequency or participation and may not capture the quality or meaningfulness of students' experiences with traditional music. As argued by Yang [9], curriculum alignment issues and superficial integration of traditional content often limit the impact of arts education on students' identity development. In many cases, traditional music is taught without sufficient cultural context or student engagement, reducing its potential to foster identity formation. Secondly, it is possible that other influential variables such as familial cultural practices, peer influences, media exposure, or community involvement play a more significant role in shaping cultural identity than school-based exposure alone. Wang and Woramitmaitree [3], for instance, emphasized the intergenerational and community dimensions of cultural learning in their study on Yongning River Boatman Work Songs, suggesting that cultural identity is deeply embedded in lived experience rather than formal instruction alone.

Furthermore, students' personal interest and cultural relevance may mediate how exposure translates into identity outcomes. If the content presented does not resonate with students' backgrounds or values, the educational intervention may be less impactful, even if technically present in the curriculum [2]. This aligns with constructivist perspectives on learning, which highlight the importance of relevance, emotional connection, and agency in identity development. In combination, the quantitative findings highlight that exposure to traditional music, while valuable, is insufficient on its own to shape cultural identity. Future interventions should therefore consider how traditional music is taught, the depth of cultural context provided, and the extent to which students are actively engaged in the learning process. In addition, more comprehensive indicators of cultural education beyond exposure frequency may be necessary to assess its true impact.

## 5 Conclusion

This study explored the relationship between arts education and the preservation of traditional folk music in Guizhou through both qualitative and quantitative perspectives. Qualitative findings from focus group discussions revealed that culturally embedded music education enhances students' cultural awareness and musical literacy, particularly when supported by community involvement and intergenerational learning. However, these efforts are often hindered by structural barriers, such as limited teacher training and lack of culturally relevant resources. Conversely, the quantitative results indicated that exposure to traditional music alone without consideration of contextual depth and does not significantly predict students' cultural identity scores. This suggests that while formal exposure to folk music is

important, it may be insufficient to foster identity development without meaningful engagement, pedagogical relevance, and community reinforcement.

In a nutshell, these findings affirm that arts education can play a meaningful role in safeguarding intangible cultural heritage, but its effectiveness depends on how deeply it is embedded in authentic, community-based, and student-centered practices. A holistic approach integrating formal instruction with local cultural realities is essential for ensuring the continuity and relevance of traditional folk music in contemporary education.

## 5.1 Further Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations are proposed to enhance the role of arts education in preserving traditional folk music and strengthening students' cultural identity. Firstly, curriculum developers should consider enriching national and local music syllabi with region-specific folk traditions that reflect the cultural diversity of communities such as those in Guizhou. Including authentic musical content within the formal education system can help make learning more relevant and meaningful to students. Secondly, there is a need for structured professional development programs that equip music educators with the skills to teach local traditions effectively. These programs should emphasize culturally responsive teaching methods and intergenerational transmission strategies that connect students with community elders and traditional bearers. Thirdly, schools are encouraged to actively engage local cultural practitioners, musicians, and heritage institutions as partners in education. Strengthening school-community collaborations can provide students with experiential learning opportunities that foster deeper connections to their cultural heritage.

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