

Challenges in Ethnic Dance Teaching: A Qualitative Study from the Perspective of Preschool Teachers

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Abstract

In the current context of integrating traditional culture into early childhood education, ethnic dance, as an important art education resource, has gradually attracted attention from the academic community for its teaching value. However, there is still a lack of empirical research on how preschool teachers understand and implement ethnic dance teaching, especially a lack of structural analysis of the challenges teachers faces in practice. Using Activity Theory as a theoretical framework and qualitative interview methods, this study conducted an in-depth analysis of the experiential structure of teachers in the practice of ethnic dance teaching. The research subjects were 25 preschool teachers with experience in ethnic dance teaching. The interview data were coded and summarized according to the six dimensions of Activity Theory. The results revealed the following challenges: Limited Cultural Cognition, Conflicted Priorities, Tool Adaptation Gap, Lack of Operational Norms, Unstable Cultural Support, and Blurry Pedagogical Roles. Based on teachers' experiences, this study constructed a challenge structure diagram based on Activity Theory, revealing the teaching tensions and institutional gaps inherent in ethnic dance teaching as an important practical mechanism for the integration of cultural heritage and early childhood education, and providing a theoretical reference for future curriculum development and teacher support systems.

Keywords: Preschool teachers, Ethnic Dance, Qualitative Research, Activity Theory

Introduction

As a form of traditional Chinese culture, ethnic dance has educational value in terms of cultural transmission and physical perception. This art form usually relies on individual historical experiences and collective cultural interactions, forming a preliminary framework for cultural cognition in children's education (Zhang, 2023). Dance practice in teaching encourages children to establish an understanding of cultural content through physical movements, a process that reflects the interactive logic between culture and perception (Tan, 2021). The current institutional support for traditional culture in schools is beginning to influence the teaching settings of early childhood education to achieve the strategic function of cultural education (Xu, 2024). In related studies, ethnic dance is not only cited as a cultural

object, but also as a practical mechanism for constructing the cultural perception of preschool children (Li, 2024).

Current research on ethnic dance teaching in the preschool stage focuses mostly on dance style selection and curriculum implementation paths, but at the teacher practice level, especially from the perspective of preschool teachers, the structure of challenges is still unclear. Existing research points out that teachers have cognitive limitations and lack teaching resources in ethnic dance teaching (Yuan, 2024), failing to address the practical challenges they encounter (Dong et al., 2024). The tension between teaching objectives and cultural expectations often constitutes a core challenge for teachers (Xu, 2024). Only by integrating teaching behaviors and cultural institutions into a unified analytical framework can the complexity of teachers' practices and the pathways of challenges be revealed (He, 2024).

This raises a core research question: What specific types of challenges do preschool teachers face in teaching ethnic dance? In order to more systematically understand the tension structure in teaching practice, this paper uses Activity Theory as an analytical framework to explore teachers' teaching experiences in six dimensions. The study aims to construct a challenge structure map based on the teachers' perspective, reveal the dynamic tension mechanism between culture and institutions in ethnic dance teaching, and provide theoretical reference for preschool art curriculum development and teacher support mechanisms.

In the preschool context, the functional boundaries of Ethnic Dance have long remained unclear, with its cultural dimensions often detached from goal-setting and resource allocation, leading to a lack of internal logical structure in teaching practices. This research aims to penetrate the surface of existing systems, extracting the pathways of teaching tension from experiential structures to identify implicit functional barriers and meaning fractures in cultural education practices.

Literature Review

Activity Theory in Preschool Drama

Activity Theory analyzes the interactive relationships among six elements in teaching—subject, object, tool, rules, community, and division of labor—to reveal the structural mechanisms underlying teachers' practices (de Moraes, 2023). Teachers' behaviors in teaching are often constrained by institutional arrangements. These constraints interfere with cultural transmission pathways, leading to shifts in the use of teaching tools.

In early childhood education research, children's learning behaviors are often embedded in institutional structures composed of tools and rules, and the tension between the two shapes the mechanism of cultural resource teaching (Solovieva et al., 2022). In the dimension of division of labor, the interactive relationship between teachers and children manifests itself in the constant reorganization of responsibilities. This structural arrangement profoundly influences the execution of teaching tasks and the way roles respond (Zhang et al., 2023). Although Activity Theory has been widely applied to research on science and technology education in the preschool stage, its theoretical embedding in the field of art education is still insufficient.

Ethnic Dance in Preschool Drama

Ethnic dance is regarded as an artistic expression of traditional Chinese culture and has gradually been incorporated into early childhood education curricula in recent years. Ethnic dance has distinctive cultural characteristics and movement systems that can promote cultural awareness and physical coordination (Lei, 2024). Dance education is considered to activate children's physical understanding of ethnic culture, thereby forming a preliminary cultural awareness (Tan, 2021).

Some studies have pointed out that introducing ethnic dance into preschool curricula helps build children's emotional connections and cultural memory (Li et al., 2023). In ethnic dance courses in colleges, universities, and primary and secondary schools, research has focused on the relationship between dance and cultural identity, as well as the teaching changes brought about by the standardization of dance genres (Zhang et al., 2022). Current research on ethnic dance teaching has not yet responded to practical issues from the perspective of teachers.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research method with a phenomenological methodological stance. Its core objective is to understand the experiential content and meaning-making pathways of preschool teachers in the teaching process of ethnic dance. This pathway emphasizes focusing the research on the internal structure of the experience itself, which is suitable for explaining the practical cognitive models developed by teachers in educational contexts (Robinson & Williams, 2024).

The sample consisted of 25 preschool teachers working in northern and central China. All interviewees had at least one year of experience teaching ethnic dance and signed a complete informed consent form. An anonymous identification code was used for coding, with numbers assigned in order from T1 to T25.

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews. Interviews were conducted in a closed, quiet space in one-on-one face-to-face conversations. Each interview lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. All audio data was transcribed into text after recording to form analyzable text. The interview content was based on the six components of Activity Theory, namely subject, object, tool, rules, community, and division of labor.

The text data was analyzed in two stages using NVivo 15 software. The first stage identified semantic units, and the second stage summarized thematic characteristics. After coding, the study followed the seven-step analysis process proposed by Colaizzi to process the text, extract expressions, integrate meanings, and construct a structural model to ensure the rigor of the research logic and the theoretical validity of the results.

Result

Limited Cultural Cognition

In the teaching practice of ethnic dance as part of the early childhood education curriculum, teachers generally rely on unstructured individual experience to construct cultural semantic systems, lacking institutionalized cognitive carriers.

T6 noted: "Regarding the cultural aspects of Ethnic Dance, I can only speak from personal experience; there are no official references."

T11 also expressed: "Teaching resources only emphasize movements, and the cultural aspects are completely absent." Cultural information is excluded from the explicit representation system in curriculum design, and teachers can only rely on contextually triggered self-regulation to explain it. This phenomenon creates a power vacuum in cultural expression within the teaching mechanism, transforming Ethnic Dance from a cultural carrier into a tool-based display centered on movement logic. The weakening of cultural objectives cannot be compensated for by mere teaching techniques.

Conflicted Priorities

The teaching task system in which teachers operate places a sustained emphasis on the priority of visualizing results, confining the educational function of Ethnic Dance to a service-oriented task and thereby compressing its space for cultural expression within the teaching objective system.

T9 notes: "Most of the time, we teach Ethnic Dance for festival performances, not for regular classes."

T13 further states: "Once the performance ends, this content is removed, and the children no longer practice it." It can be seen that ethnic dance teaching cannot find a stable space for development within the short-term logic of the institutional framework, and has been reduced to a prop for periodic audio-visual activities in the field of early childhood education. Its cultural cognitive function has lost its mechanism of generation due to a lack of continuity.

Tool Adaptation Gap

The movement repertoire inherent in Ethnic Dance is highly embedded in adult bodily experience within the context of cultural evolution, leading to severe migration barriers in the motor semantics of young children.

T5 notes: "Some Ethnic Dance movements are too complex for children to perform accurately, and they don't understand why they have to dance that way."

T17 states: "We don't have specific versions for children to learn, so we have to adapt the movements ourselves. Ethnic Dance gradually loses its original structural integrity in this context, and its instrumental functions fail to align with the developmental level of the audience, thereby ceasing to function as a mechanism for cultural cognition."

Lack of Operational Norms

Ethnic Dance instruction exhibits significant regulatory gaps at the implementation level. Teaching mechanisms lack institutional guidance, and relevant guidelines have not been formalized in written documents. Teachers are forced to rely on subjective experience to organize courses without explicit expectations regarding outcomes or behavioral pathways.

T8 stated, "There are no formal documents telling us how to teach Ethnic Dance."

T14 further notes: "We just follow what the parents say at the kindergarten." Informal power influences teaching decision-making processes, and professional judgment is excluded from the normative construction process. The absence of course regulatory mechanisms has caused Ethnic Dance to gradually lose its systemic capacity as a cultural education tool, leaving it in a state of institutional decline within the teaching domain.

Unstable Cultural Support

The cultural infrastructure supporting Ethnic Dance education has not received stable supply, with its support forms exhibiting high levels of intermittent and unstructured characteristics. Teachers generally rely on spontaneous initiatives to compensate for the institutional gaps in cultural input.

T4 states: "Most of the content related to Ethnic Dance needs to be collected by us; there is no authoritative guidance."

T16 adds: "Sometimes the school invites professional teachers from outside, but this happens very rarely and is not sustained."

External intervention mechanisms have not formed a cyclical class." ructure, lacking a feedback mechanism between the internal teaching environment and external cultural systems. As a result, ethnic dance instruction has fallen into a state of support fragmentation, with its cultural transmission function gradually shifting from practical maintenance to symbolic decoration.

Blurry Pedagogical Roles

In the instructional configuration of ethnic dance, the boundaries of teachers' functions have long been uncertain. There are no institutional markers to define their identity as cultural instructors or artistic guides, and the tension between these roles has not been systematically identified.

T12 pointed out, "Sometimes I don't even know if teaching ethnic dance is considered an extracurricular activity or part of the curriculum."

T20 further stated, "We are not professional dance teachers, so we don't know if we should teach the culture behind the dance." The blurring of responsibilities has left teachers without a decision-making anchor between transmitting the cultural core and guiding movement expression, causing ethnic dance teaching to slide to the margins of the structure and unable to establish a functional position within the institutional system.

Coding Analysis

After importing the text corpus into NVivo 15, the research team established initial nodes based on the six-dimensional framework of Activity Theory and completed the preliminary extraction of semantic units through open coding. In the first round of analysis, a total of 612 valid coded segments were identified. After secondary aggregation and categorization, six core themes and 18 sub-nodes were formed. The coding density showed a clear hierarchical focus, with Limited Cultural Cognition having the highest proportion, involving 138 quoted fragments (22.5%); Conflicted Priorities and Lack of Operational Norms followed closely, with

102 (16.7%) and 96 (15.7%) respectively. Tool Adaptation Gap and Blurry Pedagogical Roles were relatively concentrated in the descriptions of individual teachers, accounting for 13.4% and 12.8%, respectively. Data related to Unstable Cultural Support mainly manifested as evaluations of external mechanisms, with 84 instances (13.7%).

The final coding was reorganized into a graphical format (Figure 4-1), with six main themes as the central axis and node aggregation frequencies as supplementary elements. This structure illustrates the intensity of thematic focus and structural shifts within the interview data, providing a logical foundation for subsequent discussions:

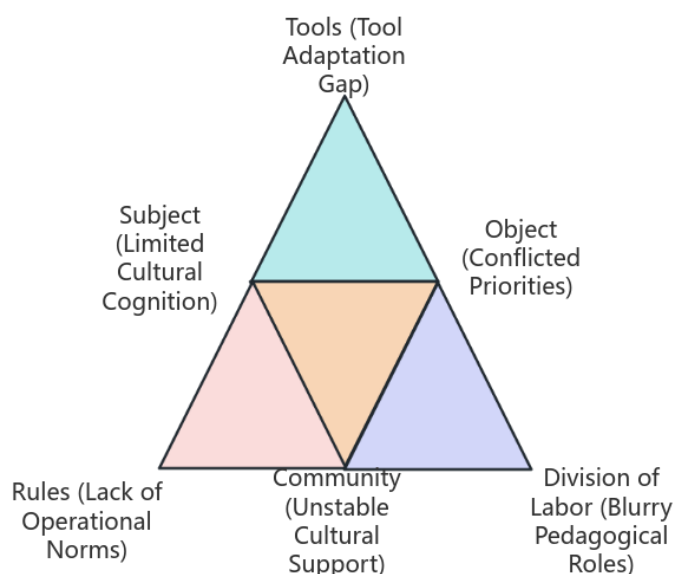


Figure 4-1 six main themes with Activity Theory

Discussion

Within the framework of Activity Theory, the semantic mechanism imbalance revealed in this study manifests as organizational fragmentation of ethnic dance in the preschool domain. Multiple axes of analysis show that the cultural transmission mechanism carried by ethnic dance in the institutional domain has exhibited structural discontinuity, with cognitive levels not embedded in the institutional system. Furthermore, the heterogeneity between cultural intent and operational logic has continued to weaken its symbolic mediation function.

In the dimension of limited cultural cognition, the semantic generation path has failed to achieve structural encapsulation at the institutional level. The cultural components carried by ethnic dance have detached from verifiable knowledge sources and rely solely on the fragmented memories of practitioners as explanatory references. Knowledge transmission is controlled by contextually triggered mechanisms, resulting in unstable cultural interpretations that cannot form a coherent logical chain of expression.

Conflicted Priorities reveal that the dominant factors in task execution are gradually shifting toward visual reproduction. Ethnic dance is often used in institutional settings for presentation in specific occasions, and its cultural attributes have not been embedded in a

lasting way. This short-term goal orientation causes semantic production to be constantly interrupted, and the content structure is dominated by momentary demands.

In the Tool Adaptation Gap dimension, the action symbols of ethnic dance fail to adapt to the bodily representation mechanisms of young children. The semantic meaning of actions is overly dependent on adult bodily experience and lacks semantic translation devices tailored for young children. Organizers, lacking reference paradigms, resort to experiential simplification instead of methodical reconstruction, leading to the gradual mutation of symbolic prototypes.

The Lack of Operational Norms dimension reflects the dissipation of conventions in the execution mechanism. The action structure and cultural connotations of ethnic dance are not incorporated into formal guidance systems, and individual execution paths cannot be verified by external procedures. The practitioners operate in a procedural vacuum, and their behavioral orientation is reconstructed by non-structural forces.

In terms of unstable cultural support, the release of cultural materials is intermittent and lagging, and the supporting structure lacks a continuous supply mechanism. External resources only appear in isolated instances and lack a periodic input loop, causing ethnic dance to lose its continuous channel of cultural maintenance and gradually degenerate from its embedded state of existence.

Blurry Pedagogical Roles reveal that the identity of performers is not clearly defined by external frameworks. Performers lack a clear identity between cultural output and action coordination, and the responsibility for performing ethnic dance cannot be anchored. Role mechanisms are not constructed at the institutional level, and individual behavior is therefore in a state of identity drift.

Conclusions

This study draws on the six-component system of Activity Theory to analytically reconstruct the cultural disembedding phenomenon and institutional interference in the teaching context of preschool teachers with experience in Ethnic Dance practice. The results reveal six mechanisms of disjunction—Limited Cultural Cognition, Conflicted Priorities, Tool Adaptation Gap, Lack of Operational Norms, Unstable Cultural Support, and Blurry Pedagogical Roles—that constitute the core triggering factors for the semantic function shift of Ethnic Dance in an educational context. The study suggests that in the absence of institutional structural frameworks, cultural mediation mechanisms, and professional empowerment pathways, Ethnic Dance cannot fulfill its cultural encoding function, and teaching practices tend to become superficial due to the lack of cognitive anchoring and tool adaptation. At the practical level, it is necessary to construct paradigms and reconstruct bodily skills to provide an operational platform for restoring its referential efficacy.

When preschool teachers carry out ethnic dance-related cultural interventions, they generally show obvious deficiencies in their ability to construct abstract cultural elements. The operational habits presented in the experiential dimension have not completed the process of knowledge conversion, making it difficult to conceptualize and reconstruct cultural symbols in teaching contexts. Given that the text data generated by this study using a

phenomenological approach possesses high semantic saturation but lacks formal parameters to calibrate the conceptual system, future research could shift toward construct modeling strategies centered on multimodal perception data to expand the structural flexibility and horizontal adaptability of theoretical outputs.

This research focuses on the multiple mismatches of Ethnic Dance in preschool practice, constructing a tension identification framework based on Activity Theory to reveal the structural misalignment between cultural tools and institutional constraints. Through a phenomenological approach to the precise analysis of experiential texts, this paper provides a transferable analytical mechanism, laying the cognitive foundation and methodological reference for future explorations into the embedded logic of cultural practices within educational contexts.

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