

Integrating Multicultural Children's Songs into Beginner Sompoton Instruction

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Abstract

The *sompoton* is a traditional bamboo mouth organ of the Kadazan Dusun community in Sabah, East Malaysia, yet it remains underrepresented in formal school music education due to the lack of developmentally sequenced instructional materials for beginner learners. Existing educational practices have largely relied on demonstration-based approaches, with limited pedagogical structuring. Situated within Malaysia's multicultural education context, this study develops a pedagogical design for beginner *sompoton* instruction using multicultural children's songs. Adopting a qualitative research approach, children's songs from Kadazan Dusun, Rungus, Malay, and Chinese traditions were analysed and selected using a Kodály-based analytical framework, drawing on criteria such as tone set, pitch range, rhythmic patterns, phrase structure, and a comfortable starting pitch. From an initial corpus of 137 songs, 37 were identified as pedagogically suitable and organised into a developmentally sequenced instructional framework. Instructional activities were designed following a singing-to-playing trajectory, informed by core principles of Kodály pedagogy, particularly singing-based preparation and sequential pitch progression. The study proposes a structured yet flexible pedagogical design that supports culturally responsive and developmentally appropriate beginner *sompoton* instruction.

Keywords: *Sompoton*, Multicultural Children's Songs, Beginner Instrumental Instruction, Pedagogical Design, Kodály-Based Analytical Framework

Introduction

In recent decades, music educators have increasingly emphasized the importance of multicultural music education in promoting cultural understanding, equity, and inclusion within formal schooling (Anderson, 1991; Campbell, 2002; Blair & Kondo, 2008). Through engagement with culturally diverse musical repertoires, students develop musical skills while gaining insight into the values and traditions of different cultural communities. However, achieving these goals requires more than the inclusion of diverse repertoire; it also depends on whether culturally grounded materials can be translated into developmentally sequenced, teachable classroom resources (Abril, 2006).

Malaysia presents a particularly complex context for multicultural music education. As a multiethnic nation comprising Malay, Chinese, Indian, and numerous indigenous communities in Sabah and Sarawak, Malaysia possesses a rich musical heritage. However, research consistently indicates that formal music education in Malaysia remains largely shaped by Western pedagogical models rooted in colonial educational history (Abdullah, 1990; Shah, 2006). Despite curricular intentions toward multicultural inclusion, the classroom implementation of indigenous and local musical traditions remains limited due to insufficient teaching resources, inadequate teacher preparation, and the marginal status of music as a non-examination subject (Wong, Pan, & Shah, 2015; Wong & Chiu, 2017).

Within this educational landscape, indigenous musical traditions from East Malaysia occupy a particularly vulnerable position. Although extensive ethnomusicological documentation exists, indigenous musics from Sabah are often introduced in schools through listening activities or brief cultural presentations rather than through sequenced, performance-based learning experiences (Chong, 2013; Chong & Lim, 2021). This situation highlights an ongoing pedagogical challenge: translating orally transmitted, community-based musical practices into developmentally structured classroom instruction. In other words, the issue is not only cultural representation but also the availability of structured pathways that enable learners to participate musically through performance.

The *sompoton*, a traditional bamboo mouth organ associated with the Kadazan Dusun community of Sabah, exemplifies this challenge. Ethnomusicological studies describe the *sompoton* as a non-ritual, solo instrument characterized by pentatonic pitch organization, free-reed sound production, and non-standardized tuning systems reflecting individual craftsmanship (Pugh-Kitingan, 2011; 2020). Traditionally transmitted through informal enculturation, the *sompoton* has received limited pedagogical attention in formal music education, where existing approaches tend to emphasize demonstration rather than systematic instructional sequencing.

At the same time, the musical characteristics of the *sompoton* suggest clear pedagogical potential. Its limited tone set and pentatonic framework align closely with principles commonly employed in beginner music learning. A Kodály-based analytical framework, in particular, emphasises singing-based preparation, carefully sequenced pitch progression within a limited range, and the use of culturally authentic repertoire as the foundation of musical development (Choksy, 1999). While such principles have been applied to Western instruments and selected local repertoires in Malaysia, systematic pedagogical engagement with indigenous instruments from East Malaysia remains limited (Ayderova & Wong, 2017; Wong & Chiu, 2017).

Children's songs offer a promising resource for addressing this gap. Valued for their limited pitch range, repetitive structures, and developmental suitability, children's songs have long served as core instructional materials in Kodály-based music education. In multicultural contexts, however, repertoire selection is often guided by representational concerns rather than pedagogical function (Abril, 2006), raising questions about how culturally diverse songs can be systematically analysed and organized to support beginner instrumental learning.

Responding to these concerns, this study focuses on the pedagogical design of beginner *sompoton* instruction using multicultural children's songs. Rather than documenting cultural practices or evaluating learning outcomes, this study addresses an instructional design problem: how multicultural children's songs can be analysed, selected, and sequenced using a Kodály-based analytical framework and related pedagogical principles to support developmentally appropriate *sompoton* instruction. By articulating a singing-to-playing instructional trajectory, the study demonstrates how culturally grounded repertoire can function as an effective pedagogical resource within formal music education contexts. The novelty of this study lies in operationalising Kodály-informed analytical criteria as a design tool for an indigenous, orally transmitted instrument and translating repertoire analysis into a developmentally sequenced instructional pathway. In terms of contribution to the social sciences, the study offers an evidence-informed model of culturally responsive curriculum design that connects indigenous cultural knowledge with classroom pedagogy, supporting broader goals of inclusion and sustainable cultural transmission within formal education.

Background of the Study

The integration of indigenous musical instruments into formal music education presents challenges that extend beyond issues of cultural representation. While many indigenous musical traditions have been documented through ethnomusicological research, their pedagogical adaptation for classroom instruction—particularly at the beginner level—remains limited. This gap is especially evident for instruments whose transmission has historically relied on oral, informal, and community-based learning processes rather than structured instructional systems.

In Sabah, indigenous instruments such as the *sompoton*, *sundatang*, and *kulintangan* are deeply embedded in cultural life and identity, yet their presence in formal school music education remains marginal. Among these instruments, the *sompoton* occupies a prominent position as a cultural symbol of the Kadazan-Dusun community. Originating from Kampung Tikolod in the Tambunan District, the *sompoton* is a free-reed bamboo mouth organ consisting of eight bamboo pipes made from *sumbiling* bamboo inserted into a gourd (*labu*) wind chamber (Pugh-Kitingan, 2011; 2020). Each instrument is handcrafted, resulting in non-standardised tuning systems that reflect individual makers' acoustic knowledge rather than fixed pitch calibration.

Traditionally, the *sompoton* is performed as a solo instrument in non-ritual contexts and transmitted through informal enculturation. Learning typically occurs through observation, imitation, and individual experimentation within community settings, rather than through structured instruction or notated pedagogical systems (Pugh-Kitingan, 2004; 2011). Performance practice emphasises short repetitive motifs, sustained drones, and personal improvisation, positioning the instrument as a medium for individual expression rather than ensemble coordination or repertoire standardisation.

While these characteristics are central to the cultural authenticity of the *sompoton*, they present significant challenges when the instrument is introduced into formal education contexts. School-based music instruction requires developmentally sequenced materials, clear pitch organisation, and pedagogical progression appropriate for beginner learners. The *sompoton's* variable tuning, absence of a standardised repertoire, and reliance on oral

transmission complicate its adaptation to classroom environments that prioritise consistency and systematic skill development.

In response to these challenges, several initiatives have sought to improve the accessibility of the *sompoton* for educational purposes. Marasan (2003), for example, employed solfège-based representations to document pitch relationships and melodic organisation as part of broader preservation and documentation efforts. More recently, Simeon and Resot Iggau (2023) developed beginner teaching resources employing stick notation to support early engagement with the *sompoton*, particularly for children and novice learners. These resources represent important steps toward accessibility by providing visual and symbolic support for beginners.

However, existing efforts remain limited in scope. Documentation oriented studies primarily focus on describing musical structure rather than articulating pedagogical sequencing, while introductory teaching materials have yet to establish a systematically organised instructional framework grounded in developmental progression and repertoire selection principles. In particular, there remains a lack of studies that examine how repertoire can be analytically selected, sequenced, and adapted to support beginner *sompoton* learning in formal educational contexts.

From a pedagogical perspective, the musical characteristics of the *sompoton* suggest considerable instructional potential. Its predominantly pentatonic pitch framework, limited tone sets, and manageable melodic range align with principles commonly employed in beginner music education. Kodály pedagogy, in particular, emphasises singing-based preparation, carefully sequenced pitch progression within a limited range, and the use of culturally grounded repertoire as the foundation for musical development (Choksy, 1999). While these principles have been widely applied to vocal instruction and selected instrumental contexts, systematic pedagogical engagement with indigenous instruments from East Malaysia remains underdeveloped.

Children's songs represent a particularly suitable resource for addressing this gap. Characterised by restricted pitch ranges, repetitive structures, and developmental accessibility, children's songs have long served as foundational materials in Kodály-based music education. When selected and organised according to pedagogical criteria rather than representational considerations alone, such repertoire can support a structured progression from singing-based preparation to instrumental performance.

Taken together, existing research reveals a clear gap between the ethnomusicological documentation of the *sompoton* and its pedagogical application within formal music education. While analytical studies and introductory teaching resources have contributed valuable foundations, systematically sequenced and theory-informed instructional designs for beginner learners remain limited. Addressing this gap requires an approach that integrates the *sompoton's* indigenous musical characteristics with Kodály-based analytical and sequencing principles, enabling culturally grounded repertoire to function as effective instructional material for beginner *sompoton* instruction.

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative approach that centred on analysing, selecting, and pedagogically organising multicultural children's songs for beginner *sompoton* instruction. Rather than measuring learner achievement, evaluating instructional effectiveness, or examining teacher cognition, the methodology was intended to clarify the instructional rationale, sequencing decisions, and practical feasibility of adapting multicultural repertoires to an indigenous instrument within formal music education settings.

The methodological process was iterative and classroom-grounded, combining fieldwork-based song collection, a review of published teaching resources, Kodály-based musical analysis, expert consultation, and exploratory classroom trials. Across the study, instructional materials were treated as the primary artefacts through which decisions about repertoire selection, sequencing, and adaptation were examined and refined. Importantly, Kodály-based principles were used as an analytical and pedagogical frame to guide repertoire choice and lesson planning, rather than as a fixed method or intervention. Figure 1 summarises the repertoire compilation, musical analysis, and pedagogical screening procedures used in this study.

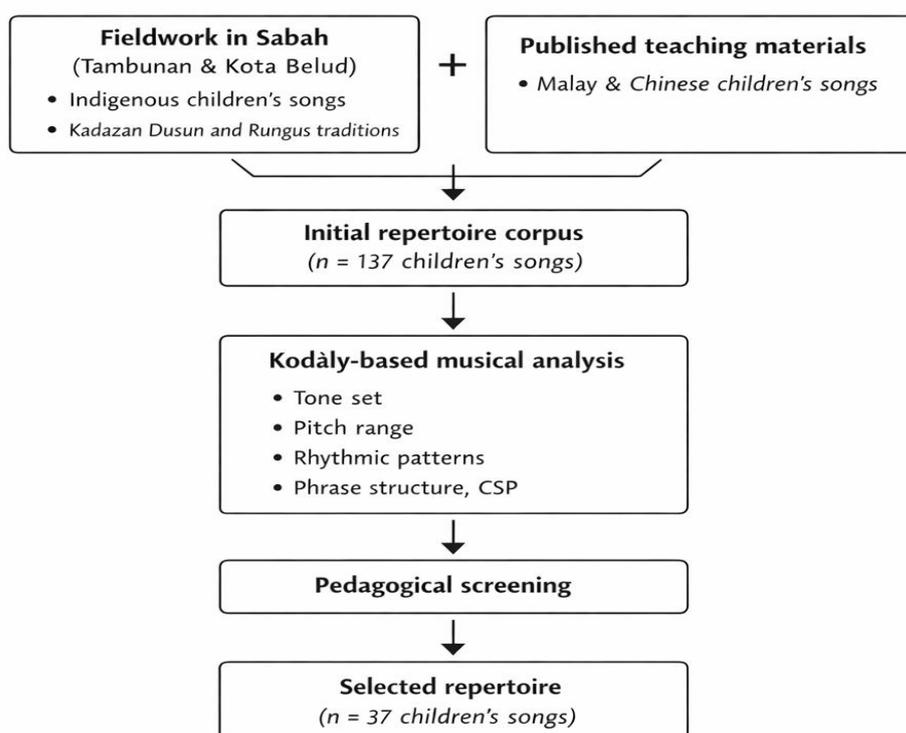


Figure 1. Flowchart of repertoire sources, Kodály-based musical analysis, and pedagogical screening.

Sources of Songs

The repertoire corpus was compiled from multiple sources to ensure cultural diversity, pedagogical relevance, and suitability for beginner learners. Indigenous children's songs were collected through fieldwork conducted in Tikolod Village, Tambunan, and Tempasuk Village, Kota Belud—two communities closely associated with the history, craftsmanship, and

performance practices of the *sompoton* (see Figure 2). These field-collected songs reflect orally transmitted repertoires encountered in community-based musical contexts.

To supplement the fieldwork materials, additional children's songs were selected from published sources. Malaysian children's songs were drawn from locally published songbooks and widely used instructional videos on YouTube. Chinese children's songs were selected from officially published primary school music textbooks for Grades 1–6 in China. These Chinese songs were included for pedagogical rather than national considerations, as pentatonic song traditions are common across many Asian musical cultures, including those found in Sabah. All selected materials were intended for children and are widely used in formal educational contexts. When some field-collected songs proved too technically demanding for beginners, carefully selected published songs were incorporated to support the development of a feasible instructional sequence while maintaining cultural and musical relevance. In total, the combined repertoire corpus comprised 137 songs representing Kadazan Dusun, Rungus, Malay, and Chinese traditions.



Figure 2. Map of Sabah showing the Tikolod (Tambunan) and Tempasuk (Kota Belud), origin of the *sompoton*.

Source: Adapted from Sabah Map Chart, PaintMaps, <https://paintmaps.com/map-charts/582c/Sabah-map-chart>.

Fieldwork and Song Collection

Fieldwork was conducted through site visits to Tikolod Village, Tambunan, and Tempasuk Village, Kota Belud (see Figures 3 and 4). These locations were selected based on their representation of both the historical origins and contemporary practice of the *sompoton* tradition. Musical activities were observed in everyday community settings, including private homes and informal gathering spaces, allowing performances to be documented as part of ordinary social life rather than staged events.

During fieldwork, the researcher documented songs, performance practices, and instrument-making processes through audio and video recording, supported by field notes. Informal

consultations and semi-structured interviews were conducted with *sompoton* makers, performers, and cultural elders to clarify repertoire origins, tuning considerations, and performance conventions. Translation assistance was provided where necessary to ensure accuracy and mutual understanding. These field-collected materials formed the foundational dataset for subsequent musical analysis.



Figure 3. Interview with Juie Maikon in Tikolod Village.

Source : Fieldwork



Figure 4. Interview with George Albert in Tempasuk Village.

Source : Fieldwork

Song Transcription and Musical Analysis

All songs in the repertoire corpus were transcribed into stick notation using a selective, pedagogically oriented transcription approach. In line with established ethnomusicological and music education research practices, the transcription focused on musical elements relevant to beginner instruction, including melodic contour, rhythmic structure, tone set, and phrase organization, while omitting ornamental details not essential for pedagogical application.

Following transcription, the songs were analysed using Kodály-based criteria commonly applied in early childhood music pedagogy. The analysis examined tone set, pitch range, melodic contour, rhythmic patterns, metre, phrase structure, and comfortable starting pitch (CSP), with the aim of identifying musical characteristics aligned with beginners' developmental capacities and the pitch affordances of the *sompoton*. At this stage, Kodály-based principles were used explicitly as analytical tools to evaluate pedagogical suitability and sequencing potential, rather than being implemented as a teaching method within the research design. Representative examples of song transcriptions in stick notation are shown in Figure 5.

黄丝蚂蚂
Huangsi Mama

Sichuan children's song

$\text{♩} = 88$

$\frac{2}{4}$

m | s | s | s |
黄 | 丝 | 蚂 | 蚂,

s | m | s | s |
请 | 你 | 出 | 来 耍,

s | s | s | |
坐 | 的 | 轿 | ,

m | m | s | s |
骑 | 的 | 马 | 。

Figure 5. Transcription in stick notation

Source : Adapted by the researcher from the original melody.

Repertoire Selection Criteria

Repertoire selection was guided by Kodály-based musical analysis and qualitative, pedagogically informed criteria rather than by experimental comparison or statistical sampling. Songs were screened for compatibility with the *sompoton's* predominantly pentatonic pitch framework and fixed pipe layout. Items containing fa or ti, unstable tonal centers, extended pitch ranges, or rhythmic complexity beyond beginner learners' capacity were excluded.

Preference was given to songs featuring limited tone sets (e.g., sol–mi, la–sol–mi, do–re–mi), short phrases, high motivic repetition, and simple duple or quadruple meters. Rhythmically, quarter notes and paired eighth notes were prioritized, while dense syncopations and complex rhythmic groupings were deferred. Through this screening process, 37 songs were identified as pedagogically suitable for beginner *sompoton* instruction and organized into a developmentally sequenced instructional framework progressing from simpler to more complex materials.

Pedagogical Application to Sompoton Instruction

The selected repertoire was organised into a pedagogical design structured around a singing-to-playing trajectory. Instructional activities were designed to begin with singing-based preparation—including solmisation, echo singing, and movement—before transferring musical material to instrumental performance on the *sompoton*. This sequencing aligns with the sound-before-symbol principle commonly associated with Kodály pedagogy.

Classroom-based pedagogical exploration was conducted in workshop-style settings to examine instructional flow, repertoire suitability, and practical feasibility (see Figure 6). Participants included beginner learners with no prior experience playing the *sompoton* and pre-service music teachers enrolled in a university music education programme. Instruction was facilitated by the researcher, with observational attention directed toward learner engagement, pitch stability, fingering coordination, and the transferability of singing-based preparation to instrumental performance.

Observational notes and analytic memos were used to inform iterative refinement of repertoire allocation, sequencing, and pedagogical pacing. These sessions were conducted for descriptive and exploratory purposes and did not involve assessment, comparison, or measurement of learning outcomes. Data were used solely to support the articulation and refinement of the instructional design.



Figure 6. University classroom micro-teaching and peer observation (24 July 2025, UMS–ASTiF Gamelan Room).

Source: Field documentation.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained in accordance with institutional guidelines. All participants provided informed consent prior to participation, and parental consent was secured for activities involving children. Participant identities were anonymised, and all audio-visual materials were stored securely. Cultural protocols and intellectual property considerations were respected, with permission sought from cultural custodians prior to the documentation and pedagogical use of field-collected materials.

Conclusion

This study proposed a pedagogical design for beginner *sompoton* instruction using indigenous and multicultural children's songs, addressing a longstanding gap between the cultural documentation of the instrument and its pedagogical application within formal music education. Situated within Malaysia's multicultural educational context, the study demonstrated how culturally grounded repertoires can be systematically organized to support developmentally appropriate instrumental learning.

By adopting a Kodály-based approach to sequencing, the instructional design emphasised singing-based preparation, limited tone sets, and gradual pitch expansion aligned with the musical characteristics of the *sompoton*. The systematic analysis and selection of multicultural children's songs revealed that repertoire choice is not merely a matter of cultural representation but a critical pedagogical decision that shapes the feasibility and effectiveness of beginner instruction. Through this process, children's songs from diverse cultural traditions were reframed as functional teaching materials capable of supporting structured instrumental learning.

Rather than presenting a fixed curriculum, the pedagogical design articulated in this study functions as a flexible instructional model that can be adapted to different classroom contexts and learner groups. The design highlights the potential of indigenous instruments such as the *sompoton* to be integrated meaningfully into school music education when instructional materials are grounded in developmental sequencing and sound-before-symbol principles.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The study focused on beginner-level instruction and did not examine long-term learning outcomes or progression beyond the initial stages of *sompoton* learning. In addition, the instructional design was developed and trialed within specific educational contexts, which may influence its broader applicability. Future research may explore longitudinal implementations, adaptations for intermediate learners, and the application of similar pedagogical design principles to other indigenous instruments.

In conclusion, this study contributes to music education research by demonstrating how Kodály-based pedagogical sequencing can be operationalised through instructional design for an indigenous, non-Western instrument. By bridging multicultural repertoire selection with systematic pedagogical planning, the study offers a practical and culturally responsive model for beginner instrumental instruction and supports ongoing efforts toward sustainable and inclusive music education.

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