



Theoretical Integration and Localized Practice: Implementing Creative Music Pedagogy within the National Curriculum Framework in Handan's Primary Schools

Song Jieyi¹, Suraya Amirrudin²

Abstract

This research examines the implementation of creative music pedagogy within China's national curriculum framework through a qualitative investigation of four primary schools in Handan, addressing tensions between standardized educational requirements and innovative pedagogical approaches. Using interpretive phenomenological analysis, the study involved 10 music educators and 3 administrators through semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and document analysis over 6 months. The investigation reveals that teacher adaptation follows a predictable five-phase developmental pathway, requiring 12 to 18 months for sustainable integration, progressing from initial resistance to strategic coordination. Cultural embedding involves complex negotiations as educators integrate local opera traditions and folk music elements within standardized frameworks, while sophisticated coordination strategies emerge, particularly "double professional life" approaches in which teachers maintain parallel professional identities to satisfy competing institutional demands while preserving creative authenticity. These findings demonstrate that meaningful educational innovation emerges through systematic teacher adaptation rather than policy reform alone, and that coordination mechanisms offer insights for other centralized education systems facing similar tensions between standardization and creativity. The investigation contributes to the theoretical understanding of educational change dynamics while providing evidence-based guidance for implementing sustainable creative pedagogy in highly regulated environments.

Keywords: *Creative music pedagogy, Cultural integration, Localized practice, National curriculum framework, Teacher adaptation*

A. Introduction

Music education within national curriculum frameworks presents ongoing challenges for educators worldwide. Many primary schools struggle to balance standardized curriculum requirements with pedagogical approaches that genuinely engage students in meaningful musical experiences (Bautista et al., 2024). Creative music pedagogy provides insights into navigating these tensions, but understanding successful implementation requires careful exploration of local contexts and educational systems (Lam, 2024). The challenge becomes

¹PhD in Education, Faculty of Business, Information and Human Sciences, Kuala Lumpur University of Science & Technology (KLUST) Malaysia-(formerly known as Infrastructure University Kuala Lumpur (IUKL), Selangor, Malaysia. 454069860@qq.com

²Senior Lecturer, Faculty of Business, Information and Human Sciences, Kuala Lumpur University of Science & Technology (KLUST) Malaysia-(formerly known as Infrastructure University Kuala Lumpur (IUKL), Selangor, Malaysia

particularly complex when rigid curriculum mandates encounter student-centered teaching practices that foster authentic musical creativity (Makris et al., 2022).

In China, recent educational reforms emphasizing "five-domain education" have elevated the importance of arts education, yet many schools face significant implementation challenges. Teachers often struggle to integrate creative approaches into established curriculum frameworks (Anderson, 2022). This situation is compounded by insufficient teacher preparation and limited understanding of how educators construct meaning around merging national standards with innovative pedagogical strategies (Ibbotson & See, 2021). Understanding how educators navigate these complexities requires deep exploration of their lived experiences and the emergent meaning-making processes through which theoretical concepts become embedded in localized teaching practices.

This research investigates the implementation of creative music pedagogy within China's national curriculum framework, focusing on primary schools in Handan. As a representative mid-sized city in northern China, Handan provides an ideal context for examining how theoretical integration unfolds in typical educational settings (Karkina et al., 2023). Through qualitative inquiry, this study explores how teachers experience integrating theoretical frameworks with local cultural elements, examining the tensions and adaptations that emerge when creative pedagogical approaches meet structured curriculum requirements. The research seeks to understand the cultural embedding processes, implementation pathways, and dynamic coordination mechanisms that characterize this complex educational phenomenon. This investigation offers a nuanced understanding of how creative music pedagogy evolves through continuous negotiation between theoretical ideals and contextual realities within specific cultural settings.

This research adopts Bernstein's (1971) classification and framing theory as its theoretical foundation to understand the tensions between standardized curriculum requirements and creative pedagogical implementation. According to Bernstein's framework, curriculum systems can be analyzed along two key dimensions: classification, which refers to the strength of boundaries between different content areas, and framing, which concerns the degree of control over the selection, organization, and pacing of pedagogical transmission. China's national curriculum framework exemplifies strong classification and strong framing, characterized by clearly demarcated subject boundaries and standardized control over instructional processes. This creates inherent tensions when implementing creative music pedagogy, which requires weaker framing to enable teacher and student agency in musical exploration, improvisation, and culturally responsive practices. The theoretical framework illuminates how teachers navigate between these competing pedagogical codes, developing sophisticated coordination strategies to maintain curriculum compliance while fostering creative musical experiences.

B. Methods

Research Framework and Design

This research adopts an interpretive qualitative case study design grounded in constructivist epistemology to explore the complex processes of implementing creative music pedagogy within China's national curriculum framework. The study employs phenomenological inquiry to understand how educators experience and construct meaning around theoretical integration and localized practice in their specific teaching contexts. The research design emphasizes the emergent, reflexive, and collaborative nature of qualitative inquiry, enabling deep exploration of participants' lived experiences and meaning-making processes. The theoretical framework is grounded in Bernstein's (1971) curriculum theory, which conceptualizes educational knowledge

transmission through the interaction of classification and framing mechanisms. Classification refers to the degree of boundary maintenance between contents, with strong classification maintaining clear subject distinctions and weak classification enabling interdisciplinary integration. Framing concerns the locus of control over pedagogical communication: strong framing limits teacher and student options, while weak framing promotes greater autonomy in selecting and pacing knowledge. Creative music pedagogy, as operationalized in this study, encompasses pedagogical approaches that emphasize student agency, musical improvisation, composition activities, culturally responsive practices, and authentic community connections. This definition emerges from the empirical evidence in this study, which shows that teachers consistently require greater autonomy in selecting knowledge and pacing to enable authentic musical expression and cultural embedding. The tension between China's strongly framed national curriculum and the weaker framing requirements of creative music pedagogy creates the theoretical space for investigating teacher adaptation processes and cultural integration mechanisms, as illustrated in Figure 1.

This framework positions theoretical integration as a dynamic process of meaning construction at the intersection of three primary domains: National Curriculum Standards, Creative Music Pedagogy, and Localized Cultural Practice. The model illustrates how teachers engage in continuous processes of systematic adaptation, contextual balancing, and cultural synthesis to reconcile competing demands. The central theoretical integration process involves personal interpretation and social negotiation, enabling teachers to construct meaningful pedagogical approaches that simultaneously address standardized educational objectives while incorporating student-centered learning, constructivist approaches, and experiential engagement. Local cultural elements—including Handan's regional musical traditions, historical narratives, and community resources—become integrated through sophisticated mediation processes that balance policy alignment with practice innovation.

The study employs interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) to explore teachers' lived experiences of implementing creative music pedagogy within standardized curriculum frameworks. IPA's idiographic focus enables in-depth exploration of individual meaning-making processes while maintaining analytical rigor through systematic phenomenological inquiry. The research design acknowledges IPA's commitment to detailed interpretive accounts of personal experiences, particularly those involving complex negotiations between institutional constraints and professional aspirations. This methodological approach is particularly well-suited to investigating the nuanced ways in which teachers construct meaning amid competing pedagogical demands, challenges of cultural integration, and identity-formation processes within educational innovation contexts.

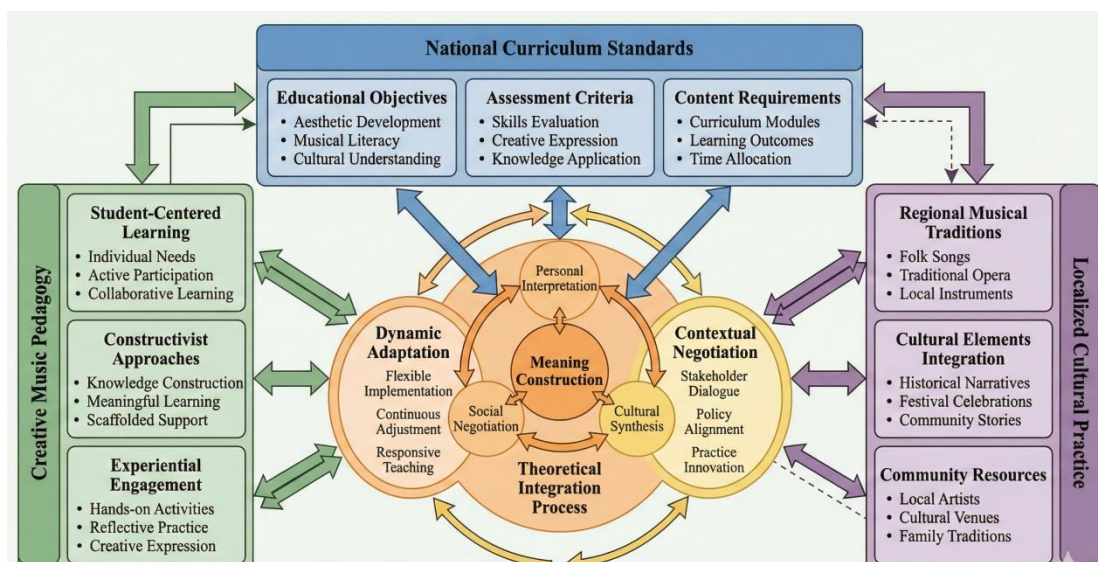


Figure 1. Theoretical Integration Framework for Creative Music Pedagogy Implementation within the National Curriculum Context

Research Sites and Participants

This research selects four primary schools in Handan as research sites through purposive sampling to ensure diverse educational contexts and implementation conditions. The selected schools represent varied geographic locations within urban and suburban districts, different levels of resource availability, and diverse socioeconomic backgrounds of student populations. School selection criteria emphasize institutional commitment to music education innovation and administrative willingness to support extended research engagement. Participant recruitment employs theoretical sampling strategies focusing on music teachers with substantial teaching experience and demonstrated interest in creative pedagogical approaches. Ten music educators participate in this study, including six music specialists and four generalist teachers who regularly conduct music instruction. Teacher participants have at least 5 years of teaching experience and represent career stages from early career to veteran educators. The participant group encompasses educators with varied professional backgrounds, training experiences, and perspectives on curriculum implementation. Additional participants include three school administrators who provide institutional context and policy perspectives. This sampling strategy ensures comprehensive exploration of implementation experiences across different educational contexts while maintaining research feasibility and depth of inquiry.

The purposive sampling strategy aligns with IPA principles by selecting participants who can provide rich, detailed accounts of the phenomenon under investigation. While IPA typically employs smaller sample sizes (6-8 participants), this study's inclusion of ten music educators reflects the commitment to capturing diverse experiential perspectives across varied institutional contexts while maintaining the depth of phenomenological inquiry. The extended engagement period of six months enables the iterative development of trust and rapport necessary for accessing authentic experiential accounts. Each teacher participant represents a unique case study contributing to the collective understanding of creative pedagogy implementation, consistent with IPA's case-by-case analytical approach. Three school administrators serve as contextual informants, providing institutional perspectives that illuminate the organizational frameworks within which teachers navigate the implementation of creative pedagogy. While maintaining IPA's primary focus on teachers' lived experiences, administrative perspectives enhance understanding of the institutional constraints and support mechanisms that shape pedagogical decision-making processes. This mixed-methods approach enables a

comprehensive exploration of the phenomenon across multiple experiential levels while preserving IPA's commitment to detailed phenomenological inquiry.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection employs multiple qualitative methods to capture a comprehensive understanding of the implementation processes of creative music pedagogy. In-depth semi-structured interviews serve as the primary data source, with each teacher participant engaging in three interview sessions spanning six months to capture evolving perspectives and experiences. Interview protocols explore teachers' meaning-making processes, implementation challenges, adaptation strategies, and experiences of cultural integration. Participant observation occurs through extended classroom visits documenting teaching practices, student interactions, and pedagogical adaptations in natural settings. Field notes capture contextual details, environmental factors, and emergent phenomena during observation periods. Document analysis examines lesson plans, curriculum materials, student work samples, and institutional policies to triangulate data sources and deepen understanding. Data analysis follows the principles of interpretive phenomenological analysis, employing systematic phenomenological reduction and hermeneutic interpretation. The analytical procedure involves multiple stages of engagement with textual materials: an initial phenomenological reading focusing on participants' experiential descriptions; systematic coding to identify emergent themes within individual cases; interpretive analysis exploring underlying meaning-making processes; and cross-case thematic development while maintaining an idiographic focus on individual variations. The phenomenological reduction process involves bracketing the researcher's assumptions and preconceptions to enable authentic engagement with participants' lived experiences. Hermeneutic interpretation encompasses both empathic understanding of participants' perspectives and critical questioning of textual materials to illuminate implicit meaning-making processes. The double hermeneutic nature of IPA acknowledges that analysis represents the researcher's interpretation of participants' interpretations of their experiences.

The interpretive nature of IPA necessitates explicit acknowledgment of the researcher's positionality. As a researcher with a background in educational innovation, I maintained reflexive awareness of potential bias toward creative pedagogical approaches through systematic journaling during data collection, regular consultation with experienced qualitative researchers, and deliberate examination of interpretive assumptions during analysis. The phenomenological bracketing process involved a conscious suspension of theoretical preconceptions about the effectiveness of creative pedagogy, enabling authentic engagement with participants' meaning-making processes. Multiple coding cycles ensure analytical rigor through constant comparison, member checking with participants, and peer debriefing, thereby enhancing interpretive validity. NVivo software supports systematic data organization and thematic development while ensuring analytical transparency throughout the interpretive process.

C. Results and Discussion

Practical Pathways of Theoretical Integration and Teacher Adaptation

This research reveals that teachers in Handan primary schools experience distinct developmental trajectories when integrating creative music pedagogy within national curriculum frameworks. The adaptation process unfolds through five interconnected phases, each characterized by specific challenges and breakthrough moments. Teacher Li, a veteran music educator with fifteen years of experience, described her initial encounter with creative approaches: "At the beginning, I worried about losing control of the classroom structure, but gradually I discovered that students became more engaged when I allowed creative expression

within curriculum boundaries." The investigation identifies that professional experience significantly influences adaptation speed, with senior teachers demonstrating greater flexibility in customizing pedagogical approaches while maintaining curriculum compliance.

The theoretical integration process emerges as a systematic coordination between prescribed standards and personal pedagogical beliefs. Teachers develop sophisticated strategies for embedding creative elements within traditional lesson structures, creating hybrid approaches that satisfy both regulatory requirements and student engagement needs. Music specialist Zhang noted: "I learned to view curriculum standards as a foundation rather than a limitation, finding creative spaces within the requirements." The adaptation process unfolds through five distinct phases that constitute a predictable developmental pathway within the twelve to eighteen-month implementation period. Phase 1 (Initial Resistance and Uncertainty) involves teachers experiencing anxiety about classroom management and concerns about curriculum compliance. Teacher Li exemplified this phase when describing her initial encounter: "At the beginning, I worried about losing control of the classroom structure, but gradually I discovered that students became more engaged when I allowed creative expression within curriculum boundaries." This phase is characterized by cognitive dissonance between existing teaching identities and innovative pedagogical demands, with teachers demonstrating cautious behavior and seeking institutional reassurance regarding the acceptance of creative practice.

Phase 2 (Cautious Experimentation) is a gradual, trial-and-error exploration in which educators test small creative elements within traditional lesson structures. Teachers during this phase develop tentative confidence through successful student engagement while maintaining conservative approaches to avoid institutional scrutiny. Phase 3 (Conceptual Reframing) involves fundamental shifts in pedagogical thinking, during which teachers reconstruct their professional identities. Music specialist Zhang articulated this transformation: "I learned to view curriculum standards as a foundation rather than a limitation, finding creative spaces within the requirements." This phase involves cognitive restructuring, where institutional constraints become enabling frameworks rather than restrictions.

Phase 4 (Strategic Coordination) involves sophisticated development of hybrid approaches that simultaneously satisfy regulatory requirements and student engagement needs. Teachers become adept at "embedding creative elements within traditional lesson structures" through advanced coordination strategies that require significant psychological and practical management skills. Phase 5 (Sustainable Integration) achieves a stable balance by gradually constructing new professional identities that successfully "incorporate innovative practices alongside established methods," enabling long-term coordination between institutional expectations and creative pedagogical integrity.

This five-phase model extends Guskey's linear professional development framework, which assumes a sequential progression from practice change to belief modification, supported by student outcome observation. Instead, these findings reveal simultaneous identity reconstruction alongside pedagogical adaptation within highly regulated contexts. The framework also elaborates Clarke and Hollingsworth's interconnected growth model by identifying specific temporal dynamics and psychological coordination processes involved when innovative practices encounter persistent institutional resistance, demonstrating that sustainable change requires sustained institutional support rather than brief intervention programs, as illustrated in Figure 2.

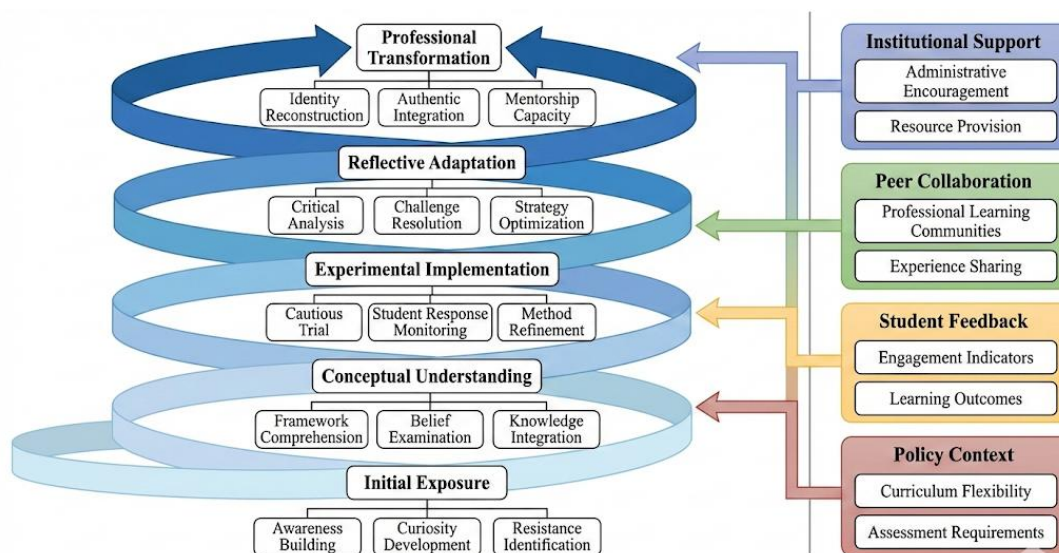


Figure 2. Developmental Pathways of Theoretical Integration and Teacher Adaptation Process *Cultural Embedding and Innovative Expression in Localized Practice*

The exploration of localized practice in Handan reveals systematic approaches through which regional cultural elements become embedded within creative music pedagogy, though implementation involves significant challenges alongside innovative breakthroughs. Teachers demonstrate varying degrees of success in integrating Handan's cultural heritage, including local opera traditions such as Pingdiao and Luozi, historical narratives from the ancient Zhao capital, and folk music elements. Music teacher Wang described her mixed experiences: "Initially, I tried incorporating traditional Pingdiao vocal techniques, but students found them difficult and unfamiliar. It took several months of gradual introduction and adaptation to help them appreciate these sounds." The research identifies that cultural embedding requires careful negotiation between authenticity preservation and educational accessibility.

Community partnerships emerge as both facilitators and complicators of cultural integration, with resource availability and stakeholder commitment varying significantly across schools. Teacher Chen shared her challenges in establishing connections: "We wanted to invite local opera performers, but budget constraints and scheduling conflicts made it difficult. When we finally arranged a workshop, some parents questioned whether traditional forms were relevant for modern education." The investigation reveals that successful cultural integration often requires creative adaptations that maintain cultural essence while addressing practical limitations. Students respond positively to storytelling approaches using local legends such as "Handan Xubu" (Learning to Walk in Handan), though teachers report difficulties sourcing appropriate materials and receiving training. The embedding patterns demonstrate considerable variation in implementation success and sustainability, as systematically documented in Table 1.

Table 1. Typology of Cultural Embedding and Innovative Expression in Localized Music Education Practice

Embedding Type	Operational Definition	Cultural Elements	Implementation Pattern	Key Challenges
Local Opera Integration	Direct incorporation of traditional vocal techniques and performance styles into regular music instruction	Pingdiao, Luozi vocal techniques	Limited adoption (gradual implementation over multiple months)	Student unfamiliarity, technical complexity

Embedding Type	Operational Definition	Cultural Elements	Implementation Pattern	Key Challenges
Historical Narrative Incorporation	Using local historical stories as thematic frameworks for musical activities and student engagement	Zhao capital stories, local legends	Moderate success (episodic integration across curriculum units)	Limited authentic materials, adaptation needs
Folk Music Adaptation	Selective modification of traditional melodies and rhythms for contemporary classroom application	Traditional melodies, regional styles	Widespread use (regular integration with curriculum content)	Balancing authenticity with accessibility
Cultural Storytelling	Embedding regional cultural values through narrative-based musical instruction and moral education	Historical anecdotes, moral tales	Popular approach (consistent use across participating schools)	Resource scarcity, parent skepticism

Note: Implementation patterns reflect qualitative observations of adoption tendencies among participating teachers rather than precise frequency counts.

Implementation Tensions and Dynamic Coordination under Curriculum Framework

The investigation reveals persistent tensions between standardized curriculum requirements and creative pedagogical aspirations, with teachers developing varied coordination strategies based on their institutional contexts and personal experience. The most pronounced tension emerges from assessment pressures that emphasize quantifiable outcomes, while creative processes often produce intangible learning benefits. Teacher Liu expressed this dilemma: "Every semester, I worry about student test scores while knowing that our most meaningful learning happens during creative exploration activities that don't appear on formal assessments." The research identifies that teachers experience daily stress in navigating these competing demands, often leading to compromised implementation or abandonment of innovative approaches.

Administrative support varies dramatically across participating schools, creating unequal conditions for the implementation of creative pedagogy. Teacher Ma described her school's constraints: "Our principal supports creativity in theory, but when inspection time comes, we're asked to focus only on textbook content. It's exhausting to constantly switch between two different teaching modes." Some teachers develop sophisticated documentation strategies to satisfy administrative requirements while preserving creative elements, though this approach requires significant additional effort. Music specialist Zhang shared her survival strategy: "I learned to write lesson plans using curriculum standards terminology while secretly planning creative activities. It's like living a double professional life." Professional learning communities provide crucial emotional and practical support, enabling teachers to share frustrations and collaboratively develop coping mechanisms.

The coordination process involves continuous compromise and strategic adaptation, with experienced teachers demonstrating particular skill in balancing competing demands. Teacher Wang described her evolved approach: "After five years of struggle, I realized that small creative moments within traditional lessons can be more sustainable than dramatic innovations that attract unwanted attention." The thematic analysis reveals interconnected patterns in which curriculum pressures directly influence teacher autonomy, which, in turn, affects student engagement levels, creating complex feedback loops that teachers must continuously navigate. These dynamic relationships form intricate networks of cause and effect, where successful coordination requires simultaneous attention to multiple stakeholder expectations while preserving core educational values, as visualized in Figure 3.

Zhang's conceptualization of "living a double professional life" emerges as a significant theoretical construct, representing a systematic bifurcation of professional identity that enables teachers to navigate competing institutional demands while preserving pedagogical authenticity. This phenomenon manifests through strategic compliance mechanisms, where educators learn to "write lesson plans using curriculum standards terminology while secretly planning creative activities," creating parallel documentation and implementation systems that satisfy administrative requirements while preserving the creative essence. The construct encompasses sophisticated coordination strategies that enable both institutional legitimacy and innovative practice through deliberate compartmentalization of professional identity across different contexts. Ma's experience illustrates the psychological complexity involved: "It's exhausting to constantly switch between two different teaching modes," revealing the emotional labor required for sustained dual-system management. This represents a form of institutional micro-resistance that preserves teacher agency within constrained environments, enabling pedagogical innovation through individual adaptation rather than direct confrontation with administrative authority. The theoretical significance lies in demonstrating how educational change occurs through accumulated teacher strategies that collectively transform practice while maintaining surface-level compliance with institutional requirements, suggesting that sustainable innovation emerges from teacher-level coordination mechanisms rather than top-down policy implementation alone.

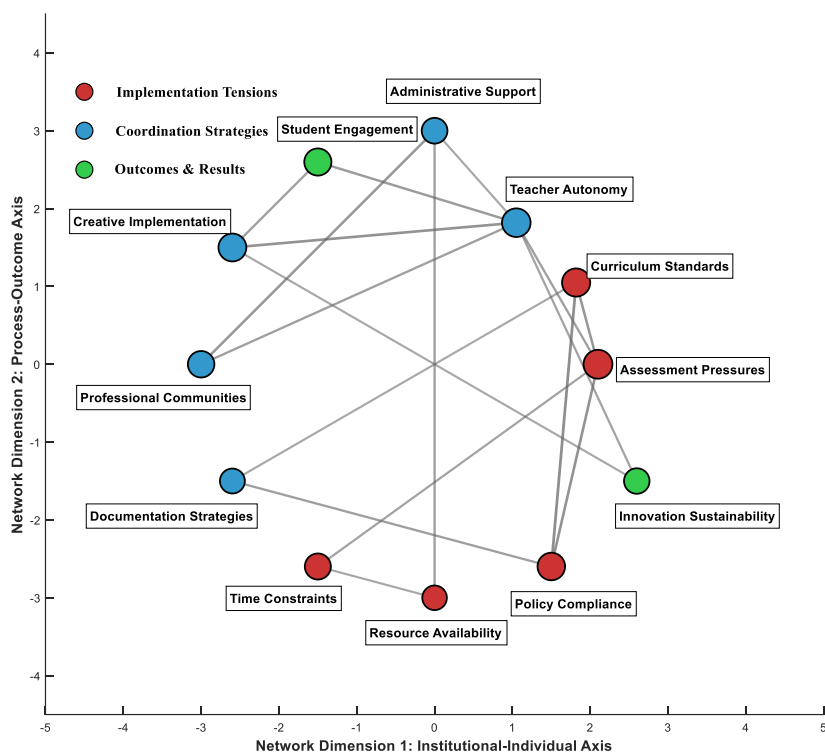


Figure 3. Thematic Network Analysis of Implementation Tensions and Dynamic Coordination Mechanisms

This research reveals how creative pedagogy integrates within rigid curriculum systems through structured coordination processes that extend far beyond simple policy implementation. The five-phase teacher adaptation pathway spanning twelve to eighteen months challenges assumptions underlying typical professional development programs, which often expect rapid transformation through brief interventions (Zhukov & Barrett, 2025). This extended temporal dimension demonstrates that effective pedagogical change requires sustained institutional

commitment rather than episodic training, particularly within centralized systems, where teachers must reconstruct professional identities as they develop new practices.

The documented cultural embedding challenges illuminate tensions unique to implementing culturally responsive approaches within standardized frameworks. Teachers' struggles with integrating Pingdiao and Luozi opera reflect broader complexities that systematic reviews identify as persistent challenges in the implementation of music pedagogy across diverse contexts (Del Barrio & Arús, 2024). However, this study reveals how these difficulties intensify within centralized systems where cultural authenticity must negotiate bureaucratic uniformity requirements. The months-long adaptation processes Wang and other teachers described indicate that cultural integration demands systematic structural accommodation rather than individual teacher preparation alone, contradicting assumptions that cultural responsiveness primarily requires enhanced training and resources.

The emergence of "double professional life" strategies represents a significant theoretical discovery, extending beyond individual coping mechanisms to reveal systematic patterns of institutional micro-resistance that enable pedagogical agency. Zhang's articulation of maintaining parallel professional identities challenges linear change models by demonstrating how innovation persists through strategic coordination rather than direct policy compliance. This finding complements work on reframing creative teaching by showing how educators construct innovative spaces within constraints through sophisticated identity management rather than overt resistance (Chatelain et al., 2024). The phenomenon suggests that sustainable change occurs through accumulated teacher adaptations that collectively transform practice while maintaining institutional legitimacy, offering alternative pathways for educational innovation beyond top-down reform.

These coordination mechanisms demonstrate particular sophistication in music education contexts, where creative expression encounters standardized assessment pressures most directly. Research emphasizes the importance of teacher agency in music education, yet this study reveals how it operates differently in highly regulated environments where external constraints shape internal development processes (Fredriksson et al., 2024). The documented strategies of embedding "creative elements within traditional lesson structures" illustrate how teachers develop hybrid approaches that satisfy competing demands, rather than choosing between creativity and compliance, suggesting a more nuanced understanding of educational innovation dynamics than binary opposition frameworks assume.

Future research should examine these adaptation patterns across different national contexts to determine the transferability of coordination mechanisms and the support structures necessary for the implementation of sustainable creative pedagogy. The temporal dynamics and psychological processes identified here offer frameworks for understanding educational innovation within centralized systems globally, while the specific cultural embedding strategies provide concrete guidance for implementing culturally responsive approaches within standardized curriculum requirements. These insights inform policy discussions about supporting innovative teaching while maintaining educational standards, demonstrating that meaningful reform arises from sophisticated teacher-level coordination rather than wholesale system replacement.

D. Conclusion

This investigation of the implementation of creative music pedagogy across four primary schools in Handan demonstrates that sustainable educational innovation emerges from systematic teacher adaptation rather than wholesale policy reform. The research reveals that

within these institutional contexts, educators follow a predictable five-phase development pathway spanning twelve to eighteen months, challenging assumptions about rapid change implementation common in professional development programs. Teachers progress from initial resistance through strategic coordination to sustainable integration, requiring sustained institutional support throughout this extended adaptation process.

The exploration of localized practice within Handan's schools illuminates how regional cultural elements become embedded in creative pedagogy through structured coordination processes. While teachers achieved varying degrees of success in integrating Pingdiao and Luozi opera traditions, historical narratives, and folk music elements, their experiences reveal that cultural embedding demands careful balance between authenticity preservation and educational accessibility. These documented coordination strategies offer concrete guidance for institutions pursuing culturally responsive approaches within standardized curriculum requirements.

Perhaps most significantly, the emergence of "double professional life" strategies among participating teachers provides insights relevant beyond the Chinese context. Educators developed sophisticated identity management approaches, constructing innovative pedagogical spaces through strategic compliance rather than direct institutional resistance. While this study focused on music education in Handan's specific contexts, the coordination mechanisms identified may inform teacher adaptation processes in other centralized education systems, including Singapore, South Korea, Japan, and France, where similar tensions exist between standardization and creative pedagogy.

These findings suggest that sustainable innovation within highly regulated systems occurs through accumulated teacher adaptations rather than top-down reform alone. However, the specific temporal dynamics, cultural strategies, and institutional mechanisms documented here reflect China's educational framework and Handan's regional characteristics. The documented pathways provide evidence-based guidance for similar educational contexts while offering theoretical foundations for comparative investigations across diverse systems facing parallel challenges in balancing standardization with pedagogical innovation.

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