



Contradictions and Adaptations: A CHAT Analysis of Western Educational Ideologies in Chinese Preschools

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Abstract

This study examines the adaptation of western educational ideologies in Chinese preschools, focusing on the contradictions, and resolutions that emerge during the transformation of western approaches within China. Using Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) as a theoretical lens, the study conceptualizes curriculum adaptation through three interconnected phases: interpretation, internalization, and operationalization. Findings reveal that Western ideologies are selectively integrated into National Guidelines and local curricula while accommodating Confucian traditions and institutional structures. Contradictions emerge between policy-driven innovation and entrenched pedagogical traditions, child-centered learning and teacher authority, and idealized curricula and localized implementation. These tensions result in a hybridized curriculum model balancing global trends with local norms. This research contributes to early childhood education studies by illustrating how curriculum borrowing and adaptation is shaped by cultural and institutional constraints, emphasizing teachers as active mediators in negotiating western pedagogies within an Eastern educational system.

Keywords Western educational ideologies · Curriculum adaptation · CHAT · Early childhood education · China

Introduction

Western educational theories such as constructivism, progressivism, and humanism have exerted a significant influence on pedagogical strategies and curricular frameworks worldwide, emphasizing learner-centered approaches and the cultivation of critical thinking and problem-solving skills (Chen et al., 2017). In China, these models have notably impacted early childhood education (ECE) (Zhu & Zhang, 2018), contributing to curriculum reforms within the local context. Over the past decades, Chinese ECE has engaged in a process of curriculum hybridization,

integrating Western theories with its longstanding Confucian educational traditions.

Research has underscored the complexities inherent in adapting Western educational ideologies to China's socio-cultural context, where borrowing models may not seamlessly align with indigenous educational values (Zhao, 2018). Research on the implementation of specific approaches, such as the Project Approach and Montessori methods in Hong Kong, further illustrate the significant role of Western pedagogical models in curriculum innovation (Chen et al., 2017). Teacher agency has also been emphasized in related research. It is often understood as situated within the tension between professional autonomy and institutional accountability, shaped by broader reform contexts as well as individual beliefs (Fullan, 2007; Biesta et al., 2015). Teachers have played a mediating role in filtering and reshaping imported literacy pedagogies, integrating Confucian values such as discipline and moral education into child-centered frameworks (Li et al., 2012).

Building on this research, the processes by which Western educational ideologies are integrated and transformed by teachers within early childhood settings in mainland China remain insufficiently examined. Whilst previous studies have investigated curriculum reforms and cultural

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adaptations, limited attention has been paid to the mechanisms through which these ideologies are localized to ensure contextually appropriate, high-quality early childhood education.

This study employs an ethnographic approach to explore the mechanisms and processes through which Western educational ideologies are adapted within public preschool settings in Shanghai. Drawing on observations, interviews, and document analysis, it examines how these ideologies are interpreted, internalized, and operationalized across three curriculum levels: the intended curriculum, teachers' perceived curriculum, and the enacted curriculum. Guided by cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT), the study seeks to provide a comprehensive analysis of the dynamic and negotiative processes that mediate the localization of Western educational theories, offering insights to inform both policy development and pedagogical practice in diverse educational contexts.

Literature Review

Western educational ideologies have long served as foundational influences in the development of ECE in China (Zhu & Zhang, 2018; Lau, 2012; Tobin et al., 2009; Li & Chen, 2016). These imported theories have been integrated and reshaped through ongoing interaction with China's distinct cultural and historical context (Li & Chen, 2016; Qi & Melhuish, 2016). Historically, China's ECE system has evolved through a series of international borrowings, reflecting a pendulum of learning from external models: from Japan in the early 1900s (Hayhoe, 1989), to the United States and other Western nations from 1912, and the Soviet Union following the founding of the People's Republic in 1949 (Ding, 2023). This trajectory underscores the profound impact of global educational movements, particularly progressive and constructivist approaches on the transformation of Chinese ECE.

Early Childhood Education in China: Curriculum Reform and the Fusion of Western and Eastern Models

Western educational philosophies, such as John Dewey's progressive education, and Piaget and Vygotsky's constructivism, have shaped China's ECE reforms (Yang & Li, 2019). Dewey's emphasis on experiential learning, child-centered education, and democratic classrooms gained traction in China as early as the 1920s. However, it was only after the 1990s educational reforms that these ideas were systematically integrated into the Chinese curriculum (Yang & Li, 2022). In 2001, the Ministry of Education released

the supplementary Guidelines for Kindergarten Education Practice - Trial Version (Zhu & Zhang, 2018). This document was greatly influenced by western educational ideologies and approaches. In particular, the associated guidelines took educational gaps between progressive ideas and deep-rooted Chinese traditional values into account and provided practical and specific requirements and content mapped to children's different development domains (Bullough & Palaologou, 2019). In general, however, implementation varies, as many kindergartens still adhere to traditional teacher-led instruction due to wider cultural expectations.

Rather than fully adopting Western pedagogies, China has developed a hybrid early childhood education model, balancing progressive, child-centered learning with the Confucian values of discipline, knowledge transmission, and structured education (Yang & Li, 2022). Previous researchers have indicated that whilst play-based learning has been promoted in policy, many kindergartens in practice integrate guided play within structured lesson plans. Such structured play-based lessons represent a fusion of western and eastern ideologies in practice. In terms of pedagogy, research has shown that constructivist, inquiry-based learning is practiced, but teachers maintain a high level of direction within this (Yang & Li, 2022).

Considering the fusion of west and east in practice, curriculum reform is increasingly advocated and a school-based curriculum is supported by central government (Yang & Li, 2018a, b). Curriculum development has been described as a process from 'imitation' to 'innovation' (Huo, 2015). Subsequently this has been viewed as a dynamic process undertaken in four main stages: *imitation*, *absorption*, *integration*, and *evaluation* (Yang & Li, 2018a, b). Underpinning such studies is the influence of western educational ideologies on practice in Chinese preschool educational settings.

The Role of Culture in Shaping Educational Adaptation

Education is deeply embedded in cultural contexts, shaping pedagogical approaches, teacher-student relationships, and parental expectations (Yang & Li, 2022). Previous research concludes that Chinese traditional culture, in particular Confucianism and Taoist thought has influenced education and practice. It is argued that this influence has resulted in an over-reliance on 'teacher-centered' practice, 'moral education', 'knowledge mastery', and 'legalism' (Chen & Yang, 2023). Yang and Li (2019), however, emphasize the ways in which imported curriculum models and approaches have impacted on curriculum innovation.

More recently, research has focused on critiquing the current curriculum and its cultural appropriateness. It has been argued that directly learning from western educational

ideologies is not appropriate in the Chinese context due to the differences in culture and education systems between China and the West. In particular, the cultural contradictions that arise when Western educational models are introduced into non-Western contexts have been highlighted. In Hong Kong and Shenzhen, for example, teachers were found to struggle to implement child-led learning due to parental demands for academic rigor (Yang & Li, 2022). In other cases, Western child-centered pedagogies are often reinterpreted in the Chinese context, where teachers integrate structured practices and moral elements into classroom instruction (Li et al., 2011). Research has shown that sociocultural factors are highly influential in shaping the Chinese ECE curriculum and pedagogy, including national policies (Qi & Melhuish, 2016; Zhu, 2018), cultural traditions such as Confucian values (Li et al., 2011; Tobin et al., 2009), imported curriculum models (Chen et al., 2017; Zhao, 2018), parental expectations, and the local community context (Yang & Li, 2019). In general, research has focused on the contradictions between policy and practice, cultural appropriateness in context, as well as a gap between pedagogical beliefs and practice (Yang & Li, 2022). This suggests that culture acts as both a constraint and an enabler in adapting Western educational ideologies, leading to hybrid curriculum models that accommodate both global and local influences. As discussed, imported educational ideas are rarely transplanted wholesale but are recontextualized (Bernstein, 2000, pp. 33–39).

Current studies have, therefore, provided a descriptive process of cultural influences on applying western ideologies and approaches in practice. This provides a foundation for further exploration of western ideologies and approaches being reshaped and tailored in other contexts. Yang's research has described four stages within a linear process of curriculum innovation between west and east. Previous research has also described curriculum 'innovation' in contemporary China (Yang & Li, 2018a, b). Yet this work does not deeply analyze the negotiation and contradictions between potential mediating factors in practice. These contradictions do not simply disappear through the four stages but require mechanisms of negotiation (e.g., teacher agency, institutional mediation, policy requirements). This paper focuses on such transformations through the three levels of the curriculum: the formal curriculum, the perceived curriculum, and the operational curriculum (OC) (Goodlad et al., 1979); thereby exploring the mechanisms of adapting western educational ideologies and approaches into a specific context.

The Three-Level Curriculum Framework and Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT)

This study draws on an integrated theoretical framework combining the three-level curriculum model: intended,

perceived, and operationalized (van den Akker, 2003; Goodlad, 1979), with Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) (Engeström, 2001). The three-level curriculum framework outlines how educational intentions are interpreted and enacted at different stages and has been widely used in curriculum research to conceptualize the disjunctions between policy design, educator interpretation, and classroom implementation. The intended curriculum means objects and content specified in official documents. (van den Akker, 2003). It refers to national and institutional guidelines, such as the National Guidelines (2012) and local teacher reference books. The perceived curriculum is the interpretation and sense-making of the intended curriculum (van den Akker, 2003). It captures how educators understand and make sense of these intentions based on their professional beliefs, experiences, and institutional contexts. The operationalized curriculum represents the actual teaching and learning processes (van den Akker, 2003). This study involves the actual practices enacted in the classroom, such as daily activity planning, pedagogical strategies, and real-time adaptations.

While this framework helps trace the path from curriculum guidelines to classroom practice, it does not sufficiently explain how contradictions emerge and are negotiated across the three levels. To address this, this study employs CHAT, which views human activity as a mediated, systemic process composed of interacting components: subject, tools, object, rules, community, and division of labor. A key contribution of CHAT is its emphasis on contradictions as the driving force of change and development within activity systems. By integrating these two perspectives, this study examines the processes by which Western educational ideologies and approaches are adapted in early childhood education practices in China through negotiation and resolution of contradictions. It explores how educators navigate and resolve such tensions through interpretation, internalization, and operationalization to form fusion. The research questions are:

- 1 What contradictions emerge during the adaptation of Western educational ideologies in Chinese early childhood education?
- 2 How do these contradictions reshape and tailor western educational ideologies and approaches resulting in adaptations within the Chinese preschool context?

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative ethnographic approach to explore how Western educational ideologies and approaches

were applied within the curriculum and daily practices of public preschools in Shanghai. Ethnography was selected to capture the contextualized processes, contradictions, and negotiations embedded within institutional and cultural settings. By situating the research within naturalistic environments, the study sought to uncover nuanced adaptations that could not be accessed through surveys or experimental designs. The choice to collect these three forms of data was guided by the focus on the three different levels of the curricula: the formal curriculum, the perceived curriculum, and the operational curriculum (Goodlad et al., 1979).

CHAT Theoretical Framework

To analyze educational practice, this study adapted cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) to explore western educational ideologies and approaches through the dynamic practice process. CHAT posits that human activity is mediated by cultural tools, historical contexts, and institutional systems, making it highly suitable for understanding curriculum hybridization (Engeström, 2001). Drawing on previous research, the activity system is conceptualized as a network of six elements connected by reciprocal relations to produce an outcome. The *subject* engages with the *object* using *tools*, but their actions are shaped by *rules*, situated within a *community*, and distributed through a *division of labor* (Grimalt-Álvaro & Ametller, 2021). Contradictions between these components, for example, between tools and traditional rules, served as the analytic points in this study.

CHAT was therefore applied to examine how Western educational ideologies were adapted in Chinese preschool practices. In the activity system, teachers acted as the subjects, interacting with mediating artifacts such as curriculum documents and teaching materials. Rules included government policies, cultural norms, and administrative expectations. The community encompassed teachers, headteachers, children, and external professionals, while the division of labor reflected the hierarchical roles within preschools. The outcome was the enacted curriculum within the ECE classroom. CHAT provided a lens to trace how cultural, institutional, and pedagogical contradictions drove the adaptation and hybridization of curriculum practices.

Research Site and Participants

This research was conducted in three public kindergartens in PuTuo District, Shanghai. One class of children aged 5–6 years was chosen from each setting comprising around 35 children and two class teachers per class. These sites were purposively sampled based on their existing curriculum, willingness to participate in the study, and their accessibility for in-depth fieldwork. In particular, prior

to recruitment, the researchers explored the existing curriculum within each setting to ensure they were following national and local curriculum reforms encouraging a transformation from a teacher-centred, results-oriented approach to one which they perceived to be more child-centred and process-oriented. At the time of the fieldwork, all three kindergartens were following national curriculum guidelines. The teachers reported regularly engaging with the National Guidelines, using the official local teacher reference books in their planning and instruction, and attending training programmes, all of which incorporated elements of Western pedagogical approaches. In addition, the headteachers had chosen to implement specific western educational approaches within their overall ECE provision; Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) in Setting A and the ‘Project-Based Learning’ (PBL) approach in Setting B and Setting C. Consequently, these sites offered a relevant and practical context for exploring how such ideas are interpreted and enacted in daily teaching practice.

Data Collection

Three methods of primary data collection were utilized for this study: document analysis, semi-structured interviews and non-participant observation. Document analysis was conducted of the *National Guidelines of 3–6 Year Old Children’s Development* (Ministry of Education, 2012), the Shanghai local reference books, and teachers’ weekly plans in order to trace how Western educational ideologies were officially framed to be adopted into practice. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with teachers and headteachers to explore their interpretations and classroom applications of Western pedagogical concepts. Each participant engaged in a semi-structured interview lasting 45–60 minutes, focusing on curriculum interpretation, adaptation strategies, and pedagogical decision-making. Observation data were collected over three weeks at each kindergarten, with two full observation cycles conducted per site. During each cycle, daily classroom activities were video recorded, capturing instructional routines, teacher-child interactions, and any adjustments made to activities when compared to the teachers’ weekly plans. Field notes, official documents, and transcribed interviews formed a triangulated dataset to ensure credibility and validity.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach using Nvivo 12 software, guided by the CHAT framework. All transcripts, fieldnotes, and documents were repeatedly read for familiarization by the first author. Open coding was then conducted across the three kinds of data, with particular

attention paid to contradictions and tentative resolutions. The codes were then sense checked with the second author and the wider literature to ensure there was a shared and credible interpretation of the data. The researchers then clustered the codes into subthemes, which were mapped onto the CHAT components to identify tensions. Finally, analytical narratives were made to trace contradictions amongst the three levels aided by triangulation and comparison between interview, observation, and documentary data. At this point a second round of interview data collection occurred with participating teachers to ensure that the analysis was credible and to further explore any gaps in the narrative thus constructed. Through this process three overarching themes emerged: interpretation, internalization, and operationalization. Table 1 illustrates how these themes were constructed through the process of linking raw data with sub-codes.

Ethics

Ethical Approval was obtained from Department of Education Ethics Committee, University of York. Headteachers provided informed, signed consent for their setting to participate in the research and teachers were provided with separate information and consent forms. Consent included the right to withdraw at any time, including withdrawal of data. Parents were provided with information sheets regarding the study and the main researcher held parental information events at each setting. Parents were entitled to request that their child was not included in any observations. All participants were reassured that the data would be pseudonymised and no setting, teacher or child would be identified in any subsequent reporting of the study.

Findings

The major findings emerging from the data analysis relate to the mechanisms by which Western educational ideologies are adapted in practice within the participating ECE settings. This adaptation was seen to occur in three overlapping phases: Interpretation, Internalization, and Operationalization, corresponding to the formal, perceived, and enacted curriculum levels. The use of CHAT provides a framework for understanding how contradictions within the activity system shape the adaptation process.

Interpretation

The initial phase of adaptation unfolded at the level of documentary mediation and teachers' early interpretations of the recommendations contained within such documents.

Table 1 Analytical matrix: from data sources to themes

Data Sources	Initial Codes (Examples from Data)	Sub-themes	Final Theme
Curriculum Documents	"Carefully design learning experiences to achieve outcomes"	Selective incorporation; Structured autonomy	Interpretation
Teacher Interviews	"We base all our activities on the guidelines and reference books; exploration is guided."	Guided exploration; Reliance on structured guidance	Interpretation
Classroom Observations	Activities presented as exploratory but tightly guided by teachers	Scripted inquiry; Controlled autonomy	Interpretation
Teacher Interviews	"We have vague impressions of these Western ideologies."	Superficial exposure; Selective integration	Internalization (Assimilation)
Teacher Interviews	"I prefer concrete examples I can use directly in class."	Pragmatic adoption; Alignment with existing practices	Internalization (Assimilation)
Teacher Interviews	"I read more about constructivism and believe it supports children's thinking."	Reflective engagement; Personal commitment	Internalization (Accommodation)
Classroom Observations	Teachers attempt PBL or child-led approaches within structural constraints	Partial application; Structural limitations	Internalization (Accommodation)
Classroom Observations	Play-based activities implemented within fixed schedules	Hybrid pedagogies; Structured play	Operationalization
Teacher Interviews	"Freedom means guided freedom, set by the teacher."	Negotiated autonomy; Teacher-guided structure	Operationalization
Fieldnotes	Teachers continually adapt lesson plans based on classroom feedback	Iterative refinement; Real-time adjustments	Operationalization

Imported Western educational ideologies were selectively reframed through the national guidelines and local curriculum materials (i.e. the Shanghai local reference books) before reaching teachers' practice. This phase featured two major negotiation strategies: selective interpretation and contextualization within local structures and norms.

Selection of Western Educational Ideologies

The first mechanism of adaptation was selective interpretation of imported epistemologies and pedagogies. National and local documents integrated Western concepts selectively, favoring those that complemented existing values and educational goals. From a CHAT perspective, this reflects a contradiction between tools (curriculum materials containing Western pedagogical ideas) and rules (local educational expectations), requiring selective alignment.

Policy documents such as the *National Guidelines* illustrate this selective process. While advocating for child-centered approaches, the Guidelines simultaneously stress the importance of ‘*carefully designing learning experiences to achieve specific developmental outcomes*’ (National Guidelines, 2012, p. 4), embedding structured planning within a discourse of autonomy. Interviews with teachers confirmed that their exposure to Western ideologies was predominantly mediated through such pre-filtered materials. One teacher explained, ‘*We base all our activities on the guidelines and reference books; exploration is guided and purposeful*’ (Interview with Teacher LL, Setting B).

Notably, the aspects of Western theories emphasizing independent inquiry and open-ended learning were deemphasized in favor of frameworks supporting measurable academic development. As one headteacher explained, ‘*Curriculum implementation should align with the city’s developmental suggestions, even if innovation is encouraged at the margins*’ (Interview with Principal Wu, Setting C). This reflects a recurring tension between the object of fostering autonomy and the rules embedded in local systems that prioritize collective outcomes and structure. Western ideals promoting unstructured, child-initiated learning were selected and interpreted, favoring those that supported structured development and collective responsibility. This resulted in a hybrid curriculum model, in which Western ideologies were not fully adopted but re-aligned to fit the normative expectations of local practice.

Contextualization of Western Ideologies with Local Norms

Following selective appropriation, contextualization processes further adapted Western pedagogical ideas to fit the operational realities and cultural expectations of Chinese preschools. Although national policies promoted exploration-based learning, local curricula reframed this into a teacher-led structure. For instance, while the National Guidelines encouraged that ‘*children should learn through daily experience*’ (2012, p. 6), local teaching guides translated this into scripted sessions. In one planned lesson, children were tasked to ‘*measure shadows*’, an

exploratory activity that followed a rigid sequence dictated by the teacher (Local reference book, 2014, p.87). Teachers explained that ‘*Even during inquiry activities, we still plan learning goals and direct children toward expected outcomes*’ (Interview with Teacher Huang, Setting C). This illustrates a contradiction between tools (the local reference books) and division of labor (teacher-led instruction), which was resolved by embedding new pedagogies within established instructional hierarchies. Although activities bore the labels of child-centered learning, teachers retained authority over both content and process, consistent with traditional values emphasizing teacher-directed knowledge transmission. ‘Child-centered learning’ was interpreted as supporting developmental requirements and needs, rather than granting unstructured autonomy. In addition, the observations suggested that child-led approaches tended to be more deeply rooted in play-based activities, particularly in less formal or transitional periods of the daily routine.

Cultural tailoring further nuanced adaptation. Self-expression, encouraged in Western models, was practiced within culturally appropriate boundaries. Teachers reflected that ‘*We encourage self-expression but within proper limits*’ (Interview with Teacher Shen, Setting A). Similarly, although a child-centered rhetoric was apparent, teachers retained their authority. As one teacher noted ‘*Freedom in our classrooms means guided freedom, set by the teacher. It is impossible to totally set freedom in class, and we need rules to continue our daily work*’ (Interview with Teacher Li, Setting B).

These accounts reflect how rules are rooted in broader social values and mediate how Western ideals such as self-expression and autonomy are enacted in practice. Thus, contextualization blended imported ideals into existing hierarchical frameworks, ensuring Western pedagogies supported, rather than disrupted, traditional structures. This alignment process exemplifies how contradictions between new pedagogical approaches and existing rules or division of labor were managed by teachers and headteachers through culturally embedded reinterpretation.

Internalization

The internalization of Western educational ideologies by teachers unfolded through two main processes: assimilation and accommodation. Teachers’ internalization was shaped by how these ideas were initially framed in official guidance documents, as discussed in the “Interpretation” section. These pre-structured formats influenced how teachers made sense of imported concepts. Some teachers found these ideas compatible with their existing beliefs, while others regarded them as vague or impractical. Such mediated understandings laid the foundation for the varying degrees of internalization.

Assimilation

For many teachers, internalization occurred through assimilation, whereby selected Western educational concepts were partially incorporated into existing pedagogical beliefs without altering core practices. This process was influenced by the nature of teachers' initial exposure, often through brief training sessions or mandated readings, which lacked depth or direct application. Teachers frequently described their understanding as fragmented: *'We have vague impressions of these Western ideologies... I know I learned them, but I don't remember much'* (Interview with Teacher Shen, Setting A). Such superficial exposure, combined with neutral or cautious attitudes, led teachers to engage with Western ideas selectively and pragmatically. Teachers tended to adopt concepts that were easy to implement or closely aligned with their existing teaching logic. For instance, the idea of 'scaffolding' was familiar and could be inserted into existing teacher-led sessions without requiring structural changes. As Teacher Li explained, *'It's hard to apply the whole theory... I prefer concrete examples I can use directly in class'* (Interview with Teacher Li, Setting B).

This pragmatic orientation was reinforced by workload and institutional constraints. Several teachers mentioned relying heavily on ready-made materials from textbooks or activity guides, rather than creating sessions based on theoretical principles. One teacher reflected that *'We try to follow the reference book - it gives structured activities. It's safer than designing something from scratch'* (Interview with Teacher Huang, Setting C).

Thus, assimilation was not a rejection of Western pedagogies, but a practical adaptation shaped by surface-level exposure, cautious or compliance-oriented attitudes, preference towards pre-structured tools, and a desire to minimize disruption to daily teaching. This resulted in a hybrid practice whereby Western concepts are retained as fragments, such as using occasional group work or child-led questioning. Teachers in the assimilation phase adopted what was useful, manageable, and acceptable, integrating selectively rather than transforming pedagogically.

Accommodation

Accommodation involved deeper internalization that altered teachers' pedagogical orientations. Teachers in this group showed sustained interest in exploring new theories and applying them in practice. They actively engaged in reflection and self-directed learning, *'I read more about constructivism after training. I also did some research about this ideology. I believe it really supports children's thinking development'* (Interview with Teacher Xu, Setting A).

These teachers were not merely responding to local government innovation requirements but were personally invested in exploring alternative methods. Teacher Li, for example, experimented with Project-Based Learning (PBL), designing activities that emphasized children's interests and inquiry. She explained that *'I adjusted my teaching to follow children's ideas. They chose a project on weather. But I only used it partly; it's hard to apply it to everything'* (Interview with Teacher Li, Setting B). This illustrates the limitations of accommodation. Although the teacher reconstructed her pedagogical logic, her implementation remained constrained by institutional structures. As she explained, *'only a few capable children were suited for this approach...and we still have to meet standard assessment goals'* (Interview with Teacher Li, Setting B).

Similarly, teachers who tried to accommodate new approaches often faced misalignments between their new teaching pedagogies and systemic expectations, including high-pressure performance assessments, and structured teaching plans. Teacher Huang, who attempted to understand PBL, ultimately withdrew due to difficulties in both implementation and understanding: *'I found it difficult to understand... I don't know how to tell the difference between PBL and theme-playing games. There's not enough time to prepare or change everything'* (Interview with Teacher Huang, Setting C).

Accommodation, therefore, represents a deeper internalization of Western ideologies, but one that remains contingent on broader structural conditions. Even among experienced teachers, contradictions between new pedagogical orientations and established classroom systems often resulted in selective application rather than comprehensive transformation.

Operationalization

The operationalization phase marks the transition from internalized pedagogical understanding to visible classroom practice. Following the interpretation of policy and partial or full internalization by teachers, this phase reflects how Western educational ideologies were enacted within existing classroom structures. This is not a static implementation but an iterative process involving modification, implementation, and refinement, shaped by contextual realities, institutional expectations, and teacher beliefs. This section primarily draws upon observation and interview data.

Modification

Modification occurred as teachers adjusted official curriculum content, pedagogical strategies, and activity formats

before classroom delivery. This step reflects how internalized ideas were reshaped to accommodate factors such as children's abilities and needs, class size, personal expertise, and institutional constraints. It reflects a stage where internalized ideas meet contextual judgment. For instance, Teacher Xu described this process succinctly: *'I change the teaching content when it doesn't suit the current children's development, even if it's in the reference book'* (Interview with Teacher Xu, Setting A). In doing so, she demonstrates the influence on her practice of children's developmental needs, which aligns with a more 'child-centered' approach. Teachers also reported modifying sessions based on their academic backgrounds. Teacher Shen noted *'I adjusted the goals in the drawing session because I think certain art skills are more important'* (Interview with Teacher Shen, Setting A). In some cases, teachers drew inspiration from outside sources to enhance engagement: *'I learned from another book that a different activity might be more interesting for our children.'* (Teacher LL, Setting B). These examples show teachers navigating contradictions between rules (curriculum requirements), tools (prescribed materials), and their own professional judgment. It explains modification as a pre-emptive filtering of Western ideologies before they reached the classroom. It is a process grounded not in rejection, but in pragmatic re-alignment.

Implementation

Implementation illustrates existing contradictions most directly, as teachers attempt to enact adapted ideas within existing classroom structures. It is here that tensions between pedagogical values and cultural norms become most evident, as teachers must make real-time decisions to manage them.

Structured classroom scenes reveal the persistence of authority-centered interactions. For instance, teachers expressed that *'We still expect children to be obedient; that's part of our culture'* (Interview with Teacher Huang, Setting C). This tension was evident in classroom interactions:

Scene 1 *During a mathematics lesson, Teacher Li observed two children not following instructions. She paused, invited questions, offered a brief explanation, and directed the student to follow up after class* (Researcher notes, Setting B).

This moment illustrates a contradiction between Western ideals of dialogic engagement and deep-rooted norms of teacher control. The teacher's actions were not dismissive, but strategically framed to preserve order while allowing minimal autonomy. It demonstrates a compromise that maintains the appearance of responsiveness without destabilizing structure.

Implementation also reveals different interpretations of 'child-centered' ideology and ideas of child-led practice. During role-play periods, children *'chose their roles and initiated narratives'*, while teachers observed rather than directed (Researcher notes, Setting B). As one teacher explained, *'We negotiate a theme with our children, but they choose how to play'* (Interview with Teacher LL, Setting B).

This reflects a negotiated pedagogy, where autonomy is conditional, structured at the boundaries. Teachers thus enacted Western ideologies selectively and situationally, embedding 'child-centered' practices into moments of lower accountability while preserving traditional forms during formal instruction.

Refinement

Refinement represents teachers' iterative efforts to improve practice through micro-adjustments based on reflection, feedback, and peer exchange. It is not theoretical adaptation, but situated negotiation, grounded in the classroom's practical demands. For instance, teachers reported *'We discuss our lessons with other teachers, share our practices, and try again in practice based on peer feedback'* (Interview with Teacher Li, Setting B).

Teachers monitored student engagement, revised instructions, adjusted groupings, or altered timings, aiming at stabilizing practices under complex demands. External support also shaped this process, including governmental guidance which was often seen as key: *'Without guidance, we wouldn't know how to apply these ideas'* (Interview with Teacher Ye, Setting C). Contradictions between the rules and teacher autonomy thereby persisted. However, refinement enabled localized resolutions. Such contradictions were not directly resolved, but adjustments were made within them. This reflects a CHAT-informed view of development, where change occurs through practical mediation.

Operationalization is not the final stage of curriculum reform, but the site of its continuous negotiation. Teachers do not simply 'apply' what they've learned or internalized. In this study teachers tended to reconstruct their pedagogies through action, managing tensions between imported ideologies and institutional structures. These three steps of modification, implementation, and refinement, represent an effort to mediate contradictions rather than eliminate them.

To further illustrate how this three-phase adaptation process unfolds in situated practice, the following section draws on two examples of Project-Based Learning (PBL) implementation observed in Setting B and Setting C. These comparative cases highlight how Western pedagogies are differentially interpreted, internalized, and operationalized by teachers, revealing the influence of institutional context, teacher beliefs, and systemic contradictions.

Examples of Adapting PBL

Case 1: Observation of PBL in Setting B *Teacher Li gathered a small group of children and asked them to vote for any specific topic they would prefer to research. Teacher Li took the topics already planned for the term and suggested the children choose one of those topics for their ‘project’. Children can decide which one they like. In this way the teacher was able to direct the students to a topic she felt was suitable and one in which she felt prepared to facilitate. The majority of the children agreed that they prefer rain and weather. In this case, Teacher Li suggested studying the weather and the pool which was connected to the session they learnt in the previous week, following the local government guidelines. Within these topics the children discussed detailed objectives they wanted to know about the pool while the teachers helped them to sift through these objectives (Researcher notes, Setting B).*

Case 2: Observation of PBL in Setting C *Teacher Huang simplified the PBL approach into small group activities. She planned several tasks for the children to choose from. She chose ‘Easter egg making’ as the main topic, setting various sub-topics for children to choose from: animal-related topics and plant-related topics. This topic is linked with the current daily activities. Based on the teacher’s general instructions, the children chose to cooperate with each other to complete this task. Teacher Huang gave instructions to the children occasionally, guiding them to finish the task (Researcher notes, Setting C).*

Interpretation

In both settings, the introduction of PBL began at the institutional level. Headteachers initiated the selection of this Western pedagogical approach, encouraged by national policy discourses promoting curriculum innovation and child-centered learning. Headteacher Wu explained that ‘*I planned to suggest to our teacher, try the Project-Based Learning approach, which I learnt from other preschools. You know we were suggested to innovate the curriculum and pedagogies due to our government request*’ (Interview with Headteacher Wu, Setting C).

This selective adoption reflects a top-down alignment of tools (PBL as an innovation strategy) with rules (policy expectations). In both settings, PBL was introduced by headteachers in response to policy-driven calls for innovation, but contextualized differently, revealing underlying contradictions. In Setting B, Teacher Li aligned PBL with prior curriculum content, balancing child choice and structured guidance; the contradiction emerged between the child-centered ideology indicated in PBL (tools) and

the teacher-led curriculum structure (norms). In Setting C, Teacher Huang simplified PBL into familiar tasks to maintain control, exposing tension between the reform-driven push for pedagogical change (rules) and entrenched norms of teacher authority (community). These cases show how contextualization mediates systemic contradictions.

Internalization

Exposure to PBL through training, professional learning, and institutional suggestion marked the start of these teachers’ internalization. However, their responses differed in terms of attitudinal orientation and the depth of pedagogical shift.

In Setting B, Teacher Li demonstrated an ‘accommodation’ process. She took a proactive stance, researching PBL and integrating it with the existing curriculum structure. Children were invited to choose among teacher-suggested topics (e.g., rain, weather, pools), allowing a degree of agency while retaining teacher control. Teacher Li explained ‘*Children can vote on a topic, but I guide them towards what fits the plan*’ (Interview with Teacher Li, Setting B). This reflected a negotiated balance between child-centered learning and curriculum alignment.

In Setting C, Teacher Huang exhibited assimilation. Yet she expressed uncertainty about how to implement PBL and restructured it into small, predefined tasks within a traditional framework. The emphasis remained on control and predictability, minimizing the open-ended, exploratory nature of PBL.

These two examples illustrate the contradictions between subject (teachers’ understandings and beliefs) and tools (PBL’s intended use), as well as the influence of the division of labor (teachers’ roles, and headteachers’ expectations). Teacher Li internalized the pedagogical goals of PBL, while Teacher Huang complied with surface requirements while maintaining traditional structures.

Operationalization

Two different versions of PBL were enacted in practice, revealing how different teachers responded to real-time contradictions between policy goals, institutional norms, and classroom dynamics. Teacher Li’s implementation reflected a hybrid approach. She facilitated small-group projects with structured freedom. While students chose the general topic, the teacher maintained framing, direction, and evaluation. The children engaged in question formulation, self-exploration and collaborative discussion, while the teacher managed coherence with curricular objectives. Such a process showed pragmatic accommodation. Teacher authority and guidance was maintained, but students experienced

(limited) autonomy within a scaffolded framework. The contradiction between child-led epistemology (tools) and classroom control (rules and norms) was negotiated through selective enactment.

Teacher Huang's implementation in Setting C reinforced traditional norms and structures. The tasks were narrowed to predefined subtopics under 'Easter egg making', with students completing tasks under direct teacher guidance. There was little room for open inquiry or student-led exploration. Such implementation was similar to the existing curriculum structure. In this setting, PBL was operationalized as structured group work rather than inquiry-based learning. The contradictions between ideological intent and teacher inertia were resolved through simplification, resulting in a loss of the core pedagogical features of PBL.

In both settings, Western pedagogical tools were adapted, not as complete adoptions, but as negotiated practices filtered through the contradictions of existing rules (government policy), norms (teacher authority), community (institutional culture), and tools (curriculum frameworks). The trajectory from selection to classroom practice demonstrates that adaptation is neither linear nor uniform. It is a process shaped by teacher agency, institutional mediation, and the strategic resolution of systemic contradictions.

Discussion

This paper investigated how Western educational ideologies and approaches were adapted in participating Chinese preschools. It identified contradictions at multiple levels of the activity system and explained how these contradictions were navigated and resolved within the local educational context.

These findings extend existing scholarship (Tobin et al., 2009; Zhu, 2018) by showing how localized contradictions drive the nuanced recontextualization of imported pedagogies. This understanding informs not only curriculum development but also teacher professional development and policymaking in cross-cultural educational contexts.

Reinterpreting Western Ideologies: Rules, Community, and Cultural Tailoring

The findings demonstrate that Western educational ideologies, such as PBL, do not enter Chinese classrooms as direct or full implementations. Instead, they are subject to reinterpretation shaped by local institutional rules, cultural expectations, and community structures. In CHAT terms, contradictions between tools (e.g., child-led inquiry, PBL, open-ended tasks) and rules (governmental policy,

Confucian values, curricular structure) triggered processes of *selection* and *contextualization*.

The findings show that western educational ideologies were selectively integrated into practice. For example, 'emotional expression' and 'learning by doing', common in Western frameworks, were selectively included in the national guidance but reshaped to fit more structured and teacher-led pedagogies. Teachers and policy guidance played a key role in mediating these selections, framing imported ideologies in ways that aligned with official goals such as curriculum modernization. This selective reinterpretation aligns with previous studies highlighting cultural tensions in adopting foreign pedagogies (Zhu, 2018; Yang & Li, 2019), but further reveals how institutional factors critically shape this process. Unlike prior research which often emphasized cultural incompatibility, this study highlights how institutional policy and local curriculum frameworks strategically mediate and transform Western ideas.

Internalization and Teachers' Agency: Assimilation and Accommodation

Contradictions in the internalization phase were centered between subjects (teachers) and tools (Western ideologies), which were further complicated by the division of labor within preschools. As seen in the examples given here, teachers were required to implement new pedagogies regardless of whether or not they fully understood them, reflecting a contradiction between personal agency and hierarchical demands.

This phase reveals that internalization is uneven and negotiated. External factors such as peer modeling, government mandates, and professional evaluation intersect with personal beliefs and competencies, shaping a spectrum of responses. This nuanced depiction of teacher agency builds upon Fullan's (2007) and Biesta et al.'s (2015) arguments regarding educator autonomy and institutional accountability, highlighting the conditions under which agency becomes constrained or enabled. This finding implies that successful pedagogical reform requires more than training, it necessitates systemic support, clear communication of pedagogical rationales, and realistic implementation expectations.

Operationalization and Hybrid Practice: Modification, Implementation, and Refinement

In the operationalization phase, contradictions arose between object (educational goals) and rules/division of labor (hierarchical systems). Teachers navigated these tensions by modifying and reconfiguring pedagogical models to suit local classroom realities.

Implementation did not reflect full adoption but rather a hybridization process. Western strategies were enacted in guided forms. For example, play-based activities were introduced but framed within fixed routines; child autonomy was encouraged within narrow parameters. Teachers adjusted sessions in real time based on student engagement, peer collaboration, or external evaluation feedback. *Refinement* emerged as an ongoing effort, supported by professional dialogues and repeated experimentation.

These findings affirm that contradictions were not barriers to reform, but catalysts for localized innovation. The emergence of hybrid practices resonates with Bernstein's (2000) notion of 'recontextualization,' illustrating how educators creatively balance external pedagogical pressures with internal classroom dynamics (pp. 33–39). Such findings suggest that rather than pursuing wholesale adoption of imported methods, policymakers and curriculum developers should encourage context-sensitive pedagogical innovation, allowing space for iterative refinement and situated adaptation.

Contribution

This study makes several contributions to the literature on curriculum reform and the cross-cultural transfer of educational ideologies. Building on the work of Yang and Li (2018a, b, 2019), 2022), which described the trajectory of curriculum innovation in China as a process of 'imitation, absorption, integration, and evolution', this study offers a more fine-grained, phase-based model of adaptation grounded in empirical data. By delineating the transformation process into three distinct but interconnected phases: *interpretation*, *internalization*, and *operationalization*, the study reveals how contradictions at multiple levels are negotiated by teachers and headteachers over time, often unevenly and with localized outcomes.

Where prior research has emphasized the gradual integration of Western constructivist ideas into Chinese ECE, this study adds depth by mapping how contradictions among tools, rules, subjects, and division of labor actively mediate this integration. The findings show that curriculum innovation is not only about epistemological compatibility or cultural acceptance, but also about institutional logic, professional agency, and policy expectations.

Furthermore, this study challenges the commonly held assumption in the literature that cultural factors alone determine the success or failure of imported pedagogies (e.g., Tobin et al., 2009; Zhu, 2018). While Confucian values such as respect for authority and structured learning remain influential, the data demonstrate that institutional structures, such as policy mandates, hierarchical school governance, and professional training models, equally contribute to shaping how Western ideologies are interpreted and enacted.

The study also contributes to CHAT-based educational research by offering a practical example of how contradictions within an activity system can operate. It illustrates how imported ideologies do not replace local practices but are selectively appropriated, recontextualized, and hybridized into new pedagogical forms. In this view, reform is neither a top-down imposition nor bottom-up resistance, but a negotiated process within and across systems of meaning, authority, and practice.

Finally, by grounding its analysis in ethnographic data and CHAT theory, this study provides a framework for future investigations into cross-cultural pedagogical transfer, especially in contexts where global policy agendas intersect with localized institutional and cultural realities. This study also provides practical implications. By exploring how teachers pragmatically negotiate imported ideologies, the findings suggest that professional development should prioritize reflective engagement and contextual adaptation rather than rote compliance. Headteachers and policymakers can also draw on this study to design support structures that allow for experimentation, iterative refinement, and teacher dialogue, thus fostering sustainable innovation.

This study also opens new avenues for research. Future studies could examine the longitudinal trajectories of hybrid pedagogies to assess their durability and impact on child development. Comparative research across different regions or educational levels may test the applicability of the three-phase model. Furthermore, exploring children's perspectives on hybridized practices would deepen our understanding of how adaptation is experienced at the learner level.

Overall, this study expands our understanding of cross-cultural curriculum adaptation by illustrating how educational ideologies undergo complex, contradiction-driven transformations within local contexts. By foregrounding the agency of teachers and the mediating roles of institutional structures, this research provides critical insights that can inform both future studies and practical initiatives aimed at meaningful, context-sensitive pedagogical reform.

Limitations

This study offers a detailed analysis of how Western educational ideologies are adapted within Chinese preschools, although several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the research was conducted in three urban public preschools in Shanghai. As such, the findings may not be more fully generalisable. In particular they may not represent practices in rural or under-resourced areas, where institutional structures and cultural norms may operate differently. This study also focused primarily on the adaptation of pedagogical models such as constructivism and Project-Based Learning,

rather than a broader range of Western educational frameworks (e.g., Reggio Emilia, Montessori). Although this focus allowed for in-depth analysis, future research could explore how different imported ideologies generate different types of contradictions and hybrid practices.

In addition, given that an ethnographic approach was adopted, the interpretation of contradictions may be influenced by researcher inference, particularly when such contradictions were implicit or embedded in institutional culture. A longitudinal design or the inclusion of parent and policymaker perspectives could further enrich the analysis.

Finally, the study concentrated on classroom-level adaptation and did not explicitly examine how teacher education programs, district-level governance, or broader political dynamics shape these micro-level transformations. These represent important areas for future investigation.

Implications

The findings of this study suggest several implications for educational policy, teacher training, and preschool administration in China and other contexts of educational borrowing.

First, policymakers should recognize that imported pedagogies, such as constructivist learning or project-based models, are not universally applicable in their original form. Reform should allow for context-sensitive adaptation, with space for teachers and institutions to navigate contradictions between policy expectations, local traditions, and classroom realities.

Second, teacher training programs must go beyond the transmission of imported educational theories. They should support critical mediation, providing teachers with concrete strategies to interpret, adapt, and integrate new pedagogies within existing practice. This includes exposure to case-based learning, collaborative design, and reflective inquiry around how to resolve tensions between child-centered goals and structured institutional demands.

Third, school leadership plays a crucial role in curriculum adaptation. Headteachers act as mediators between policy and practice, and their role in initiating, framing, and supporting pedagogical change should be more explicitly recognized in both policy design and research. Encouraging collaborative professional learning communities could also enable teachers to co-construct hybrid pedagogies grounded in shared reflection and experimentation.

Lastly, reform agendas should adopt a process-oriented view of change. This study reinforces that educational innovation does not occur through linear implementation but through cycles of contradiction and resolution, negotiation and adaptation. Sustainable transformation depends on engaging educators as agents in this process, rather than positioning them as passive recipients of reform.

Data Availability The authors do not have permission to share data.

Declarations

Ethical Approval was obtained prior to data collection, approved by University of York ethical commitment. Informed consent was secured from all participants, and all data were anonymized to ensure confidentiality.

Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have influenced the work reported in this paper.

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