



Miao Ethnic Kindergarten Teachers' Concerns, Solutions, and Attitudes in Localizing a 'Foreign' Curriculum in Southwest China

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Received Date: February 21, 2025

Published Date: February 28, 2025

Abstract

Among the Miao ethnic minority areas, there has been a local effort to adopt Anji Play. This play-oriented kindergarten curriculum originates from Zhejiang, a tier-one province, into the Qiandongnan Prefecture of Guizhou. However, teachers' experiences, perspectives, and attitudes play a critical role in successfully improving curricula [1,2], especially in places where cultural contexts significantly differ from those of the curriculum's origin. Together with issues including cultural mismatches and differing educational philosophies, localizing the Anji Play from Zhejiang was no easy task. This article focused on narrating Miao teachers' perspectives, concerns, and attitudes on the complexities of curriculum localization that permeated their attempts to ensure that educational practices resonated with local cultural values. At the end of the article, feasible means to empower the local Miao teachers to exercise their professional judgment and implementation while adapting unfamiliar curricula to local contexts are also discussed.

Keywords: Play-Based Curriculum; Curriculum Localization; Ethnic Minority Group; Kindergarten Education

Introduction

Globalization has led many regions to adopt foreign curricula and practices into local education, including theories and curricula models [3-6]. However, in the process of curriculum adoption, conflicts, and alienation such as the intentional or unintentional marginalization of local norms, are both inevitable and frequent [7]. As local educational systems and schools adopt foreign practices, they often find that the improvements needed are beyond the curriculum itself; they also face the challenge of embracing fundamentally different educational philosophies [8,9].

While there is considerable research on the transformation of

play curricula in kindergartens across a range of diverse settings [10-12], studies focusing on play-based curriculum improvement efforts seldom pay attention to the unique socio-cultural context of ethnic minority regions. Other scholars reiterated that it is crucial to develop kindergarten curricula that reflect local cultural characteristics. Narratives, and images, which are considered conducive to personal development in other contexts should be questioned and contested, especially for settings with different sets of educational beliefs, such as those in minority areas [3,6,7,13-15]. In China, these regions are often those most in need of curriculum improvement and localization efforts. Typically, the imported

curricula with foreign origins and models differ significantly from traditional curricula, which can create tensions in the process of curriculum localization [16].

More recently, both Chinese educational authorities and scholars, whether intentionally or unintentionally, have actively made adjustments during the introduction of foreign curricula to better meet local needs in China [4,17]. They recognize that for regions with unique cultural characteristics and an uneven distribution of resources, it is crucial to develop curricula tailored to local needs and conditions to ensure that all children have access to equitable educational opportunities [18,19]. Thus, it is evident that affording localization to implement foreign curricula in regions with pronounced indigenous cultural features and ethnic traditions often faces great challenges and requires further scrutiny [14]. Meanwhile, teachers are the principal practitioners and enactors of curriculum localization and are key to any successful curriculum models or improvement efforts, yet their expertise and agency in designing localized curricula have neither been fully understood nor recognized [2,20].

This article is based on six pilot interviews of a study that aims to investigate the various facets of teachers' agency in the localization of an Anji Play curriculum and approach within the rural Miao ethnic minority kindergartens in southwest Guizhou of China. Given that Anji Play embraces progressive views of kindergarten education and originates from the economically and educationally developed eastern coast of China, while are not naturally shared by kindergartens in Miao areas, we set out to study kindergartens that have a significant number of Miao children and are currently implementing Anji Play. Little did we know about the Miao teachers' perspectives and attitudes in the curriculum localization process, and whether or not the ideologies and practices of the borrowed play-based curriculum are compatible with the Miao socio-cultural context. As Li et al. (2012) stated, any unquestioned implementation of borrowed curriculum and pedagogy would defy the intention of curriculum improvement plans. This article seeks to lay out and understand the narratives constructed by the local Miao teachers in the localization process of Anji Play, and provides an example of kindergarten curriculum localization for teachers in similar situations.

Conceptual Framework

The Myths of Localization in Curriculum Design

The idea of localization came into existence in recent years. Localization requires the dissemination, adaptation, and development of paradigms of knowledge, technology, behavioural norms, culture, and local values within the unique social, cultural, economic, historical, and geographical contexts of each country, region, or community, as a response to globalization [6]. Therefore, curriculum localization would imply emphases on ensuring that curriculum content and teaching methods are connected to the real-life experiences of local students within these specific and unique contextual conditions. It aims to respect and reflect local culture and values, allowing education to maintain a global perspective while remaining grounded in local contexts [6]. In the case of education,

it has been suggested that localization of curriculum can counteract the alienation caused by cultural mismatches in certain regions, making the content more relevant to the local context [21], easier for children to understand and accept, and beneficial for enhancing the quality of kindergarten education. Hence, this view counteracts a myth that many Chinese educators uphold, i.e. foreign curricula are better than the local ones [22].

Localization of a curriculum also means adjusting content not only to a national context but also to a local cultural context, and a broader regional one [13]. The phenomenon of curriculum localization observed in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East, reveals localized curriculum practices sometimes displaying different characteristics across these regions. For instance, in certain minority regions with a history of colonization, the challenges they encountered often exhibited notable similarities: a lack of suitable indigenous curriculum models or the inability to develop location-based curriculum post-colonialism, leading to the awkward continuation of the previous curriculum [13,23,24]. This has prompted similar resistance from students and teachers across different regions, some asserting that schools should no longer predominantly teach colonial-era knowledge [24,25].

Similar localization efforts also existed in China and other Asian regions, which were characterized by a top-down approach primarily led by the government [18,26]. The earliest instance dates back to 1989 when the National Education Committee (the former Ministry of Education) issued the Regulations on Kindergarten Education Practice [27], marking the beginning of central government-led efforts to guide and reform kindergarten curricula in China. One of the objectives mentioned in the regulations emphasized the importance of developing play-based teaching and learning. With the government's top-down curriculum reform approach and China's increasing openness to foreign influences, various international curriculum models, such as the Montessori, the Reggio Emilia, the Project Approach, and the High Scope Curriculum, have significantly attracted the attention of Chinese scholars and practitioners [18]. As a result, blended curricula emerged from the integration of local practices and imported methodologies. Chinese educators have described such curricula as results of the localization of imported educational models. Zhu and Zhang (2008) provided an example of this with the Shanghai-style Integrated Theme-Based Curriculum, which represents a localized model of a progressive kindergarten curriculum in Mainland China. In addition to integrative models, activity-based models grounded in constructivism have been proposed as a replacement for traditional curriculum models [28]. These new educational ideas were introduced by policymakers, but challenges have emerged alongside such ideas. One type of challenge involves an over-reliance on Western curriculum traditions, often neglecting local contexts [4,17].

Teachers' Dilemmas in Curriculum Localization

In this article, we refer 'foreign curricula' or 'foreign curriculum' to those curriculum models that are designed based on different sets of values, beliefs, and resources from the local ones. In the

implementation of foreign curricula in Chinese kindergartens, practitioners typically face six major obstacles, with localization being seen as the process of overcoming these barriers while drawing on external curricula [18,29]. These obstacles include: low teacher-student ratios, which hinder personalized learning; inadequate professional competencies of teachers; and a lack of original resources and materials for implementing the borrowed curriculum. The remaining three can be summarized as conflicts between local values and 'imported' educational philosophies, such as China's emphasis on academic learning; the tradition of utilitarianism, and a high level of control and obedience.

Another type of challenge of curriculum localization relates to the practical implementation by teachers and practitioners [16]. The main obstacles include a low teacher-to-student ratio, insufficient teacher competencies, and certain structural issues within the curriculum. Given the value and challenges of achieving individualized learning in a collective environment, kindergartens and teachers in southeastern coastal regions have been working to overcome these difficulties and reconcile these contradictions [30]. Kindergarten teachers also lacked the relevant firsthand experience and training about the borrowed practices [31], while also facing high parental expectations for academic achievement [32]. These challenges have resulted in a belief vs. practice trench in their localization efforts. Simply put, it has been difficult for teachers to enact curriculum localization [8,9].

Challenges concerning rural teachers could scale up due to various disadvantageous positions they are in. Earlier research suggested that it was primarily due to the scarcity of local resources, low salaries, and harsh working conditions, for early childhood teacher educators [18]. Rural teachers have limited access to high-quality, appropriate pre-service and in-service professional training opportunities, their overall professional expertise has been considered generally low [33]. Moreover, more than one-third of teachers in rural areas lacked a recognized professional qualification in early childhood education [34]. Even with professional qualifications, about one-third of teachers had only a high school level of education, which accounted for a significant gap between the educational level of teachers in urban and rural areas [35]. Rural teachers often have less access to curriculum resources to support their innovations, such as teaching aids, toys, and instructional materials. Rather, rural teachers in financially disadvantaged regions and rural areas must find locally appropriate ways to create instructional materials to support curriculum implementation and localization efforts.

Previous research largely acknowledged that in indigenous or minority areas, significant factors influencing curriculum localization are abstract factors such as specific cultures and ideologies. At the same time, researchers have broadly examined how teachers' qualifications, beliefs, and actions influence curriculum improvement and localization practices, as well as the obstacles teachers face in implementing advanced educational concepts and curriculum models. The aforementioned knowledge about ethnic minority teachers is primarily derived from studies conducted in kindergartens located in the affluent eastern regions

of China, where both the teachers and children are not from ethnic minority groups, and the kindergartens are situated in economically developed urban centres. Given the significant differences between ethnic minority regions and the conditions faced by teachers in urban and rural areas, this study seeks to address the following research questions:

- 1) What are the Miao teachers' perceptions and primary concerns that mark the curriculum localization of Anji Play in Miao kindergartens with respect to the local contexts?
- 2) How do these teachers' formulated solutions lead to their attitudes toward curriculum localization, thereby achieving their perceptions of high-quality learning in local kindergartens?

Anji Play in the Current Study

Anji play is a play-based curriculum model that originated in Anji County, Zhejiang Province, China, distinguished by its unique cultural and educational characteristics. This model emerged during a time when most kindergartens in China were engaging in 'fake play', and it effectively fulfilled the requirements of the Guidelines for Kindergarten Education (Trial), which emphasized that kindergartens must 'take play as the basic activities' [36]. Anji play insists that both the intention and direction of play come from the children themselves and 'True Play' can only be the play initiated by children. From an educational perspective, Anji play holds the belief that 'True Play equals True Learning' and that 'the curriculum arises naturally in children's activities' [37]. Based on this philosophy, Anji play educators provide children with various materials, such as buckets, wooden boxes (cubes), ladders, mats, and planks, to enable them to engage in adventurous play outdoors. Therefore, Anji Play advocates for teachers to adopt a stance of understanding children, providing such an inclusive environment, and maintaining a humble, uncertain, curious, and awe-inspired approach toward the children's developing knowledge and efficacy [38]. Following that, teachers' strategies in enacting Anji Play are expected to strategically observe closely children's play ideas, analyse these ideas, and provide guidance for children's further thinking and challenge their own ideas and capabilities.

Methodology

A qualitative and interpretative approach was used to conduct this ongoing study. The data reported in this article were collected from Miao teachers in several public kindergartens in a tier-four city and its nearby rural areas that have a big Miao population. Purposive sampling was adopted and kindergartens implementing the Anji Play and a Miao-culture enriched curriculum [39] were recruited. A thematic analysis approach was employed to inductively interpret the interview data. Following Creswell's procedural spirals, data were organized according to timelines and types [40]. Researchers engaged in iterative readings of participants' responses to the research questions. Initial codes were generated, and similar codes were grouped into categories with reference to the frameworks of curriculum localization. These categories were then abstracted into overarching themes. This analytical process facilitated an in-depth

understanding of the teacher agency in localizing the curriculum within the Miao cultural context.

Findings

Narrated Perspectives and Concerns

Localization of a 'foreign' curriculum is never easy and straightforward. Our research question one sought to study the Miao teachers' perceptions and primary concerns that marked the curriculum localization of Anji Play in Miao kindergartens with respect to the local contexts. The following perceptions and concerns of the Miao teachers could provide insights into the localization process and the nature of curriculum localization in this very context.

Prioritizing safety issues

The Miao teachers, especially the experienced ones were aware of the risky play activities that characterized Anji Play. The equipment of Anji Play encouraged children to exercise their physical competence and calibrate the risk involved. The teachers who were very familiar with the low-risk theme-based and ethnic-enriched curriculum [39] were frankly shocked by the risk level that the Anji equipment stimulated. A teacher exclaimed,

When we first had the opportunity to witness Anji Play in other kindergartens, we all felt that the teachers there really let go of the children, and let the children play with the high-risk kind of play, we were very scared (of children hurting themselves) (C-T1-24.7).

At first, we didn't really know how to observe (strategically), and we worried the children might get hurt during the Anji Play, so we were reluctant (R-T3-24.11).

Since it was a prominent feature of Anji Play, it was almost inevitable that children could get injured, no matter how small the injury was. The teachers' concern for safety issues was escalated by the parents' queries and doubts about the ability of such young children. The teacher continued,

Our head teacher said, first we had to guarantee children's safety, then we had to take care of the parents' questions, how should we address them, and how could we ease their worries (C-T1-24.7).

Teachers' dilemmas in curriculum implementation have been suggested in previous studies [18,29]. Localizing a curriculum that advocates a different set of educational ethos immediately posits challenges on the teachers' part, as evidenced by the Miao teachers interviewed.

On-site professional training matters but not perfect

Low qualification of kindergarten teachers in ethnic minority areas has been reported in previous studies. But low qualification might imply different drawbacks for different groups of teachers, and these Miao teachers articulated clearly what they meant by low qualification. As the Anji Play is an open-ended curriculum practice and has a focus on children's interests in learning rather than teachers' ideas of teaching, a strong sentiment was evidenced among the Miao teachers in their lack of a set of more complex educational skills on observation, information analyses and write-

up of reports, and also a research sense. Below are examples of these teachers' comments,

In the beginning, we had no idea where to start, didn't know what to observe about the children, and didn't know what to observe during the play process (C-T2-24.7).

I didn't know how to observe, or even what to look for when watching the children play. The things we were focusing on probably weren't that meaningful. ...When we did observe, it was pretty superficial, we'd just watch how the children communicated, what they played about, and what kinds of materials they used. We were just looking at those things (R-T2-24.11).

After observing the children's Anji Play time, we had to analyse and write down the process, ... my difficulty lies in the analytical writing. After assessing their behaviours, you still had to analyse them. I find the analyses especially difficult (C-T1-24.7).

Evidently, there had been a lot of on-site training for these Miao teachers in kindergartens by their counterparts who were experienced in the Anji Play approach. However, the Miao teachers were also aware that even the on-site training was insufficient or ideal in terms of understanding the Anji Play curriculum. A Miao teacher commented,

We did conduct training outside (the Miao region), to have a look at how the Anji teachers implemented Anji Play activities. In fact, we never saw their actual sharing sessions (on analysis of children's play), but only saw what was on the walls (play stories children created), and also when children were playing, that's what we saw. But in terms of sharing, including Anji teachers' analyses, these parts we never got to see. So, we were quite puzzled and really wanted to see their sharing, to see how other (Anji teachers) conducted the analyses after children's play activities. Yes, we felt sorry about that, didn't have the opportunity to see that, the teachers' sharing part. In fact, that's most critical (C-T1-24.7).

This key teacher's remarks might suggest that these Miao teachers expected to learn all about the Anji Play approach from other Anji teachers who were more experienced in the approach. Earlier research suggested that kindergarten teachers also lacked the relevant firsthand experience and training about the borrowed practices [31], and possessed insufficient competencies. Nonetheless, their reliance on others could be somewhat disappointing. It also showed that teacher professional development has to come from local and on-campus efforts. Professional training provided by others could only be as much as one can have access to.

Positive impacts on continuous teacher development

Disregarding the difficulties and challenges posted on these Miao kindergarten teachers, they also saw the positive aspects of adopting Anji Play. The experienced key teachers suggested,

It is still difficult. ... Let me tell you, because my intellectual level can only reach this level (not high), haha, so I have to keep learning. If you want to adopt Anji Play, you really have to take on life-long learning, or you cannot level up. Only after a short while, you will be outdated (C-T1-24.7).

We faced a lot of challenges in many areas before. ... Teachers needed to constantly explore, learn, and discover in order to adopt the Anji Play approach. Now, after repeated learning, I've gained more teaching experience, whether using building blocks or other materials. I've also become more aware of our own situation, at least we don't blindly imitate others' methods anymore. ... We're starting to think more about what the children in our rural areas really need (R-T1-24.10).

This young Miao teachers' persistence showed that they noticed the challenges that the Anji Play brought to them, especially when they had a low starting point, but still demonstrated teacher's role and faced the challenges.

Teachers' Solutions Applied and Attitudes Formed

To understand how the teachers eased the concerns and formed their attitude toward Anji Play during this curriculum localization process, we also asked the research question, i.e. How did these teachers' formulated strategies lead to their attitudes toward curriculum localization, thereby achieving their perceptions of high-quality learning in local kindergartens?

A strategic planning for parent education

Despite the challenges alongside the adoption of Anji Play, the parents' concerns about children's safety were considered by these Miao teachers a strong hurdle and issue to ponder about. A three-step plan was used to ease parents' mind, as articulated by a teacher:

When we visited the Anji Play kindergartens, we took a lot of videos, like when children were on those big Anji rollers, and their block constructions, different kinds of play, and climbing up the high ladders. Then we showed these videos in the parent meeting. In fact, we were letting parents know that we were going to adopt this Anji Play curriculum. ... We needed their collaboration, and also their daily guidance for children, right! So, we kept on communicating with the parents. And after we have had some positive learning outcomes, we organized another parent meeting to share with them what their children have achieved. The parents were amazed by what their young children could do, and some had become more brave, more outgoing (C-T1-24.7).

It is well-known that Chinese parents have high expectations for teachers to teach children hard knowledge [32]. These Miao teachers' endeavours to address the parents' concerns and earn their trust with strategic planning and unceasing communication skills were evidenced in our interview data. They were also supported by the kindergarten administrators, which will be illustrated as below.

Administrative support advanced curriculum localization

Throughout the interviews, these Miao teachers described how their adoption of Anji Play has been supported by their kindergarten administrators and local education bureau officials (C-T1-24.7, C-T2-24.7, C-T3-24.7). Firstly, for leading kindergartens in the city, on-site visits to Anji Play kindergartens in various tier-one cities were arranged by local education officials. In terms of

resources, safety mattresses and helmets for children during play time, learning materials such as books and videos were made available for these Miao teachers. More importantly, peer sharing sessions within kindergartens were organized and teachers enjoyed a certain level of autonomy in designing the activities. For smaller town and village level kindergartens, which were even more 'foreign' to or unfamiliar with the Anji Play values and approach, were assisted by key teachers from the leading kindergartens in all aspects of the adoption of Anji Play. As described by a town-level kindergarten teacher,

Each semester, our kindergarten teachers, principals, and key teachers have opportunities to engage in on-the-job training. In the process of job-shadowing and training, we started by mimicking those outstanding teachers, and over time, we were able to develop our own ideas. This process took about 2 to 3 years. After training at more advanced kindergartens, when we returned, our own kindergarten had regular large teaching research sessions one or two times a week. During these sessions, we'd share the knowledge we learned and apply those methods in our own classrooms (T-T1-24.10).

Initial attitude of localizing Anji Play formed

According to the Miao teachers interviewed, they started learning about Anji Play in 2018. With the support from some parents and administrators, they had ventured into Anji Play and its approach. These Miao teachers reported specifically on two aspects of Anji Play that they were most comfortable with. One was the replacement of expensive Anji equipment. These teachers' attitude toward Anji Play were as follows:

There was this way, using the Anji Play idea to launch our localized play activity, say standing on the stilts. In fact, in Zhejiang they don't have this thing. We applied the play idea and connected it to play things that had been available here locally. The Anji Play equipment was expensive. But the town and village level kindergartens could not afford. So, we replaced them with local play equipment. It was successful and, in the end, we shared this specific case with other kindergartens in the area (C-T-24.7).

They (Anji Play) designed the big plastic rollers, but they are expensive. So, they (local teachers) replaced them with big plastic pipes, or something like that. This kind of replacement, yes, it's obviously localization. Or maybe we don't have their (Anji Play) environment, teachers in towns and villages would make use of local materials and equipment to build a local play environment (C-T2-24.7, C-T3-24.7).

The materials used in the Anji play were all collected from the teachers' hometowns. In Guizhou, the bamboo from different mountain areas varies in length and thickness. Our head teacher asked us to collect these materials and use them according to the different characteristics of the bamboo. For example, we'd use thicker bamboo in the arts and crafts area, while the thinner bamboo poles were used in morning exercise activities, like bamboo pole dancing. In this way, we applied different types of bamboo to different activities, such as morning exercise, which not only added fun to the activities but also incorporated some ethnic elements (R-T1-24.10).

These Miao teachers seemed quite content with the curriculum localization process of Anji Play and its approach. There was evidence showing that a hybrid curriculum and teaching [41] has been constructed. Rather than applying the philosophy of children's learning to conduct a culture-enriched local curriculum, these Miao teachers materialized the Anji Play using local resources to create play environment and opportunities.

In Anji, Zhejiang, the play environment there was very cozy and green, but the facilities at our kindergarten actually do not reach that level. Therefore, we focus more on making reasonable use of existing resources and capturing the essence of Anji play, rather than simply copying everything. We aim to understand what kind of rural environment we have here and whether we can adapt it according to our own local conditions (R-T1-24.10).

In resource-scarce areas, teachers sometimes spontaneously find ways to use local resources to create rural curriculum that are adapted to local conditions [14]. By using local resources, these Miao teachers connected the knowledge children gained through playing with application of the familiar materials easily found in their living environment, which the teachers were proud of.

Discussion

With the initial findings illustrated above, the complexity of curriculum localization is self-explanatory. Even though the Miao kindergartens teachers appreciated the Anji idea of children's learning, which highlighted children's interests should be respected, all the interview responses pointed to outdoor activities, the indoor ones were still subject to classroom rules and regulations. The learning through play philosophy of Anji Play had not yet been applied to that of Miao culture and traditional knowledge. Would the teachers be aware of that and continued to integrate the Anji Play ideas into other domains of the curriculum remains to be seen. The teachers in the ethnic minority areas have been repeatedly reported as in disadvantaged positions [33,42], high attrition rate was noticeable [43]. This would mean that even though the teachers acquired the Anji Play, there was no guarantee that they would remain in the minority areas. Together with most parents' emphasis on knowledge acquisition, how much of Anji Play would get integrated into the local culture-enriched curriculum, if there was one, is still uncertain. We also saw support that these Miao teachers received from the kindergarten administrators and local education bureau in terms of on-site training and purchase of Anji resources. Unfortunately, despite their on-site training opportunities, teachers realized that they could not find all the solutions to their queries. Instead, organizing more on-campus sharing and discussions of lesson designs and play ideas were more pragmatic for clarifying their doubts in executing the Anji Play curriculum. Moreover, the support for small kindergartens in the town and village areas, which were the ones most in need of support and resources, was still insufficient and needed to be scaled up. Therefore, in order to achieve the goals of kindergarten curriculum reform in China, the various issues related to teacher training and professional development must be addressed promptly, especially in rural and ethnic minority areas where the quality of teachers is relatively low [44]. Only by enhancing teachers' professional

development, improving the quality of training, and emphasizing practical teaching experience can the overall quality of early childhood education be improved.

Conclusion

The study is still ongoing. We have so far identified specific obstacles faced by Miao teachers during the localization process. The adoption of Anji Play curriculum and approach is still based on a trial-and-error basis, and there is still a long way to build alignment with the local Miao cultural context. By emphasizing the local Miao teachers' perspectives on curriculum localization and implementation, the findings in this article provoke more questions, and seek a broader discourse on educational localization and practical insights for policymakers and early childhood educators in minority regions in China and elsewhere.

Acknowledgment

None.

Conflict of Interest

No conflict of interest.

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