

# Dilemmas and Improvement Strategies of Rural Preschool Teachers in Creative Dance Teaching: A Self-Determination Theory Perspective

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## Abstract

Creative dance, as a form of early childhood education integrating artistic expression with physical and mental development, has gradually expanded into rural preschool settings in recent years alongside the revitalization of rural education. However, teaching quality in these areas lags significantly behind urban counterparts, reflecting structural deficiencies in resources, training, and support systems within rural regions. This study, grounded in Self-Determination Theory, explores the dilemmas and improvement strategies faced by rural preschool teachers in creative dance teaching. Employing qualitative research, the study selected 20 rural preschool teachers from kindergartens across six counties in three Chinese provinces. Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews and analyzed using thematic analysis for coding and refinement. The findings revealed three major themes: limited autonomy, low confidence, and lack of support. Based on these themes, the study proposes three improvement strategies: curriculum empowerment, professional training, and resource linkage. This study complements the understanding of rural preschool teachers' motivation for creative dance teaching based on Self-Determination Theory and provides insights for enhancing creative dance teaching practices in early childhood education.

**Keywords:** Creative Dance, Rural Preschool Teacher, Self-Determination Theory, Qualitative Research

## Introduction

Against the backdrop of the ongoing advancement of the “rural revitalization” strategy, education revitalization has been established as the core pillar for driving rural social development (Wang, 2023). With sustained national investment and policy support for the rural education system, China's early childhood education system is undergoing a transformation from “universal access” to “high-quality education.” Rural early childhood education has achieved significant improvements in enrollment rates and resource allocation, yet regional development imbalances persist (Chen & Yang, 2024). In recent years, curriculum development in rural early childhood education has gradually diversified, with arts education gaining increasing recognition for its value in promoting the holistic development of preschool children (Zhao & Yuryeva, 2025). Among these, creative dance—characterized by its

integration of artistic expression, bodily movement, and emotional experience—is regarded as a vital educational form for enhancing preschool children's creativity and overall competence (Dewi & Yufiarti, 2021).

Despite the growing recognition of creative dance as an essential component of early childhood education, its implementation in rural preschool settings remains under-researched and underdeveloped (Tan et al., 2022). Existing studies have primarily focused on urban preschool teachers and institutional arts programs (Xiong & Son, 2025), overlooking the unique contextual challenges faced by rural preschool teachers in creative dance instruction. Rural preschool teachers often struggle with limited autonomy, insufficient competence, and lack of relatedness, reflecting the three unmet psychological needs emphasized in Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2017). This deficit in intrinsic motivation manifests in rural preschool teachers' reduced creativity and weaker engagement in arts-based pedagogy (Yang & Chen, 2025). Moreover, the cultural and infrastructural constraints of rural regions hinder sustained implementation of creative dance teaching (Arasomwan & Daries, 2024).

Although creative dance teaching has developed a relatively well-established curriculum system in urban early childhood education, rural areas still face significant disparities in resources and quality. Research indicates that imbalances in educational opportunities, teacher qualifications, and curriculum resource allocation between urban and rural areas constitute the primary structural factors contributing to the persistent lag in rural early childhood education quality (Liu, 2024). Lacking sustained professional development mechanisms and external resource support, teachers exhibit clear limitations in curriculum design, instructional innovation, and classroom implementation. Some educators experience anxiety and maladjustment when confronting new curriculum reforms, demonstrating insufficient confidence and sustained motivation in creative dance teaching (Tan et al., 2022). Furthermore, some rural preschool teachers lack systematic dance pedagogy training and underestimate the educational value of creative dance, often equating it with rhythmic movement or recreational activities (Xiong & Son, 2025). This misunderstanding of the curriculum marginalizes creative dance in teaching practice, hindering its educational potential. A more prominent issue lies in the absence of a development and support system for rural preschool teachers. Research indicates that rural preschool teachers commonly face insufficient training opportunities, lack of professional guidance, and high work pressure (Liao et al., 2025). This not only diminishes their initiative in arts education but also limits rural preschool children's learning opportunities in physical expression and creative development.

To clarify the root causes of these issues, it is essential to define the concept of creative dance within early childhood education. Creative dance teaching emphasizes process-oriented and expressive approaches, advocating that preschool teachers employ inspirational, guiding, and collaborative methods to help preschool children achieve self-construction and aesthetic experiences through movement (Payne & Costas, 2020). Creative dance in early childhood education is not merely an artistic teaching form but an educational approach that promotes preschool children's comprehensive development (Marinšek & Denac, 2020). Within the context of rural early childhood education, creative dance teaching holds dual significance for educational equity and cultural preservation. It not only enhances preschool

children's artistic literacy but also enables teachers to embody creativity and local cultural identity in their teaching practices (Yang & Mee, 2025).

Therefore, grounded in the motivational perspective of SDT, this study aims to explore the dilemmas and improvement strategies of rural preschool teachers in creative dance teaching. Theoretically, this study utilizes the SDT framework to reveal the formation mechanisms of rural preschool teachers' motivation for creative teaching, offering a localized perspective for rural educational psychology and teacher development research. Practically, it provides targeted improvement strategies for educational administrators and teacher training institutions to enhance rural preschool teachers' artistic education capabilities and curriculum implementation skills, thereby promoting the high-quality development of rural early childhood education.

### **Literature Review**

SDT emphasizes that individuals satisfy three fundamental psychological needs—autonomy, competence, and relatedness—in learning and teaching activities, serving as a key mechanism for stimulating intrinsic motivation (Wang et al., 2019; Ryan & Deci, 2017). This theory is widely applied in early childhood education to explain the formation and sustained development of preschool teachers' motivation in teaching practice. Research indicates that when teachers receive autonomy support, emotional affirmation, and professional feedback in their work environment, their teaching enthusiasm and innovative performance significantly increase (Bizimana, 2025). Within China's educational context, developmental guidance and structured training effectively foster intrinsic motivation and teaching efficacy among rural preschool teachers (Yang & Chen, 2025), further validating SDT's applicability in teacher motivation research. Positive psychological intervention programs have been proven to effectively enhance rural preschool teachers' well-being and professional competence (Lee et al., 2024), thereby promoting their sustained professional growth.

Creative dance teaching, as a vital form of arts education, has garnered attention in early childhood education for its comprehensive nature, creativity, and educational potential. Research indicates that creative dance teaching emphasizes inspiration and collaboration in the instructional process, advocating for teachers to guide and collaborate with preschool children to facilitate self-construction and aesthetic experiences through movement (Payne & Costas, 2020). Creative dance teaching can enhance preschool children's creative expression, emotional regulation, and social interaction (Bajar, 2025). Simultaneously, the integrated arts teaching model combining music and dance effectively improves rural preschool teachers' artistic education capabilities and teaching confidence (You et al., 2025). These findings indicate that creative dance teaching not only cultivates preschool children's creative thinking but also promotes the professional development and teaching motivation of rural preschool teachers.

Nevertheless, existing literature reveals a significant research gap at both theoretical and practical levels. At the theoretical level, studies applying SDT to rural early childhood education remain limited. Most prior research has focused on urban preschool teachers, with insufficient exploration of rural preschool teachers' motivational mechanisms, satisfaction of basic psychological needs, and creative dance teaching behaviors (Liao et al., 2025). At the practical level, the development of creative dance teaching in rural areas continues to face

constraints related to educational resources, preschool teachers training systems, and cultural environments (Jarar & Kurniawati, 2025). Although previous studies have confirmed the educational potential of creative dance teaching in promoting preschool children's creativity and engagement, few have systematically examined its implementation within rural early childhood education or the professional support mechanisms that sustain preschool teachers' motivation and competence. Therefore, this study, grounded in SDT, aims to fill this research gap by investigating the dilemmas and improvement strategies of rural preschool teachers in creative dance teaching, thereby providing both theoretical and empirical support for future research.

### **Methodology**

This study employs a qualitative research approach, utilizing SDT as its theoretical framework to explore the dilemmas and improvement strategies of rural preschool teachers in creative dance teaching. Qualitative research facilitates an exploration rooted in individual experiences, revealing the challenges and intrinsic motivations teachers encounter in real-world teaching contexts. It also provides a social and psychological lens for understanding the logic behind their behaviors. This approach aligns with SDT's three dimensional structure, autonomy, competence, and relatedness, offering a theoretical foundation for analyzing teachers' psychological needs and external support mechanisms.

The study involved 20 rural preschool teachers from six counties across three provinces in China. All participants were currently employed and possessed experience in creative dance teaching. The sample ensured representativeness across different regions and teaching backgrounds. All participants voluntarily joined the study, signed informed consent forms, and the research was approved by the university Ethics Committee, meeting ethical standards for humanities and social science research.

Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews. Interview questions were designed based on the three dimensions of SDT, focusing on rural preschool teachers' teaching motivation, challenges, and support needs in creative dance teaching. Interviews were conducted in quiet meeting rooms within kindergartens, lasting approximately 30-40 minutes each. Recordings were preserved with participant consent. Following the interviews, the research team transcribed the recordings verbatim into text, numbered T1-T20, and anonymized the data.

Data analysis employed thematic analysis, utilizing Nvivo 15 software for coding and categorization. Researchers first conducted open coding to identify semantic units related to the three dimensions of SDT and the research themes. Subsequently, axial coding was used to integrate similar concepts. Finally, thematic structures were inductively formed through selective coding. The analysis was conducted independently by two researchers and cross-checked to enhance reliability and consistency. The resulting themes reflect the dilemmas rural preschool teachers face in creative dance teaching, establishing the theoretical and methodological foundation for subsequent results and discussion sections.

### **Result**

Through two rounds of thematic analysis, this study ultimately identified three major dilemmas faced by rural preschool teachers in creative dance teaching from 20 interview

transcripts (T1–T20): limited autonomy, low confidence, and lack of support. These themes fully reflect the practical challenges rural preschool teachers encounter in curriculum design, instructional implementation, and professional development, revealing key factors affecting their intrinsic motivation and teaching quality.

### *Limited Autonomy*

Coding analysis of the interview data revealed that semantic units related to autonomy appeared 32 times across all transcripts. Rural preschool teachers commonly reported a lack of decision-making space in creative dance teaching, with teaching content and formats largely dictated by the kindergarten administration, making personal innovation difficult to implement.

T2 stated: “I really wanted to let the children create their own movements in creative dance class, but the kindergarten requires us to perform uniform movements, saying that uniformity looks better.”

T5 expressed: “We wanted to play some light music for the children—they love moving around freely—but the higher-ups always insist on lining up and performing neatly. We can't dance freely.”

T11 mentioned: “Most of the time, I just follow the lesson plan. Whatever it assigns, I teach. If I want to modify the content, I have to seek approval.”

This feedback indicates that rural preschool teachers experience limited autonomy in teaching. They often passively execute prescribed content, struggling to adapt lessons based on preschool children's interests and creative tendencies. This lack of curriculum flexibility prevents creative dance teaching from truly embodying its “creative” value.

### *Low Confidence*

Semantic units related to confidence appeared 24 times in the Nvivo 15 coding. Teachers commonly expressed low confidence in dance instruction, primarily due to insufficient professional background, lack of dance training, and limited teaching experience.

T6 stated: “I'm not professionally trained in dance. I learned creative dance by watching online videos, and my movements aren't standard. I always feel uncertain.”

T9 mentioned: “Urban kindergartens hire professional teachers. Here in the countryside, conditions are poor. When parents compare our teaching to videos, they feel we're inadequate.”

T13 added: “When children ask me how to wave their arms or spin, I'm sometimes unsure myself and worry about teaching them incorrectly.”

These interview excerpts reveal that rural preschool teachers experience low confidence in creative dance teaching. This stems both from objective limitations in professional skills and constraints within the rural educational environment. Some teachers develop anxiety when facing evaluations and comparisons, which dampens their teaching initiative and willingness to innovate.

### *Lack of Support*

Codes related to support appeared 29 times in the Nvivo 15 analysis. Teachers consistently reported that creative dance teaching in rural kindergartens lacks essential space, equipment, and training opportunities, with extremely limited external resource support.

T4 stated: “Our classroom is too small. We have to move the tables outside just to dance. With more children, there's simply no room to turn.”

T10 expressed: "I want to learn new things outside, but training is only available in the city. The distance is far, the costs are high, and the kindergarten won't approve leave."

T18 added: "No one at the kindergarten understands dance. I wanted to ask someone to review the children's movements, but I couldn't find anyone."

Analysis reveals that support deficiencies primarily manifest as inadequate infrastructure, lack of professional guidance, and insufficient collaborative environments. Rural preschool teachers often face creative dance teaching challenges alone, lacking teaching resources and peer support. This isolation hinders their instructional improvement and professional growth.

## **Discussion**

This study, grounded in the three-dimensional psychological needs framework of SDT, identified three major dilemmas from interview data with rural preschool teachers: limited autonomy, low confidence, and lack of support. These findings reveal that rural preschool teachers face a dual challenge in creative dance teaching: a lack of intrinsic motivation coupled with insufficient external support. To address these issues, the study proposes three improvement strategies: curriculum empowerment, professional training, and resource linkage. These correspond to the three dimensions of SDT: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. These strategies aim to provide rural preschool teachers with feasible pathways for instructional improvement by addressing both psychological needs and institutional support.

Regarding limited autonomy, interview findings reveal that rural preschool teachers generally lack decision-making authority over curriculum and instructional freedom. Creative dance teaching is often passively executed according to pre-established plans by the kindergarten administration, making it difficult to incorporate creativity and accommodate individual differences. This lack of autonomy restricts rural preschool teachers' innovative space and intrinsic motivation. According to SDT, autonomy is a core element in individuals' perception of self-control and choice. When rural preschool teachers are granted choice in curriculum design and teaching methods, they are more likely to demonstrate initiative and creativity. Therefore, this study proposes curriculum empowerment as a responsive strategy. By granting rural preschool teachers greater flexibility within the curriculum standards framework, they can adapt teaching content and formats based on preschool children's interests and local cultural characteristics. This approach helps restore rural preschool teachers' pedagogical agency and promotes the diversification and personalization of creative dance teaching.

Regarding low confidence, the study found that rural preschool teachers generally lack systematic dance training and teaching experience. This leads to low self-efficacy in creative dance teaching, making them prone to anxiety and withdrawal. This is closely related to the competence dimension in SDT. When rural preschool teachers perceive inadequate competence or excessive external evaluation pressure, their intrinsic motivation significantly diminishes. To address this, professional training should strengthen their dance teaching capabilities and pedagogical confidence. Training content should encompass not only foundational creative dance skills and physical expression techniques for preschool children but also classroom pacing, creative guidance, and instructional reflection. Training formats should combine continuity with participation, such as online learning, peer support, and in-

service workshops, to accommodate the time and geographical constraints of rural areas. Through ongoing professional training, rural preschool teachers can accumulate experience and refine skills in teaching practice. Positive feedback enhances their teaching confidence, thereby activating their sense of competence and teaching motivation.

The lack of support reflects the widespread issue of unequal resource distribution within the rural education system. Rural preschool teachers engaged in creative dance teaching face not only material constraints like insufficient space and equipment but also a lack of instructional support from peers and external experts. This isolated working environment diminishes their sense of belonging and professional motivation, adversely affecting teaching continuity and quality. From the relational perspective of SDT, social connections and emotional support are vital sources for sustaining intrinsic motivation. Consequently, this study proposes resource linkage as a solution. Establishing regional educational resource-sharing platforms to integrate urban and rural educational resources, facilitating the exchange of curriculum case studies, instructional videos, and exemplary practices, can effectively alleviate professional isolation in rural areas. Simultaneously, establishing collaborative mechanisms among universities, experts, and early childhood education institutions provides targeted guidance and continuous feedback for rural preschool teachers. Additionally, encouraging kindergartens to incorporate community cultural resources, such as local music and folk dance elements, into instructional design makes creative dance teaching more attuned to the local cultural context. This dual connection to society and the profession not only provides external support but also enhances rural preschool teachers' sense of belonging, thereby fulfilling their psychological need for relatedness.

As shown in Table 1, this study constructs a logical correspondence table of Dilemmas and Improvement Strategies based on SDT to demonstrate the intrinsic matching relationships within the three-dimensional structure.

Table1

*Mapping between SDT Dimensions, Dilemmas, and Improvement Strategies*

Theory	Dilemmas	Improvement Strategies
Autonomy	Limited autonomy	Curriculum empowerment
Competence	Low confidence	Professional training
Relatedness	Lack of support	Resource linkage

## Conclusion

This study, grounded in the three frameworks of SDT, delves into the primary dilemmas faced by rural preschool teachers in creative dance teaching and explores pathways for improvement. Through semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis with 20 rural preschool teachers from six counties across three Chinese provinces, the study identified three core dilemmas: limited autonomy, low confidence, and lack of support. Addressing these issues, the study proposes three improvement strategies: curriculum empowerment, professional training, and resource linkage. These strategies are systematically explained within the three dimensions of SDT: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Findings indicate that rural preschool teachers' intrinsic motivation formation and teaching efficacy are constrained by multiple structural factors, while appropriate institutional support and

professional growth mechanisms can significantly enhance teachers' initiative and creativity in creative dance teaching.

From an academic perspective, this study expands the localized application of SDT within rural education and arts instruction. Previous studies predominantly focused on urban teachers or general educational settings. By introducing SDT into the context of rural early childhood education's arts instruction, this research reveals the interactive mechanisms and contextual variations of autonomy, competence, and relatedness within creative dance teaching. This theoretical extension not only deepens our understanding of teacher motivation structures but also provides empirical evidence for educational psychology regarding the motivations driving teacher professional development. Furthermore, the findings validate the applicability of the SDT framework in explaining the teaching behaviors and emotional experiences of rural preschool teachers, offering a new perspective for cross-cultural educational motivation research.

At the practical level, this study offers direct implications for curriculum development and teacher training in rural early childhood education. Curriculum empowerment strategies help institutionally provide rural preschool teachers with greater decision-making space in curriculum design, encouraging them to create innovative teaching activities that integrate local culture and children's interests. Professional training offers teachers feasible pathways to enhance dance skills and teaching confidence, strengthening their professional competence. The establishment of resource linkages offers a practical pathway for the sustainable development of education in rural areas. By facilitating the sharing of educational resources between urban and rural areas and fostering multi-party collaboration, it promotes equity and diversity in arts education. The implementation of these strategies not only improves the teaching experience of rural preschool teachers but also drives the overall quality enhancement of rural preschool education.

Despite achieving certain theoretical and practical outcomes, this study has several limitations. First, the sample size is relatively small, covering only rural preschool teachers in select regions, necessitating further validation of the findings' generalizability. Second, while qualitative research effectively uncovers deep experiences and perceptions, it lacks quantitative validation. Future studies may integrate quantitative methods to enhance the external validity of conclusions. Third, the educational practice of creative dance teaching exhibits cultural and policy dependencies. Differences in educational resources, management systems, and cultural contexts across regions necessitate comparative analysis from cross-regional or cross-cultural perspectives in future research. Additionally, this study focused solely on the teachers' perspective, failing to sufficiently incorporate the viewpoints of preschool children and administrators. This represents an important direction for future research expansion.

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