

Teacher Agency in the Context of China's Curriculum-based Ideological and Moral Education (CIME): A Integrative Conceptual Review

Bai Yanling

¹Language Academy, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, 81310, Johor Bahru, Malaysia, ²Xinhua College of Ningxia University, 750021, Yinchuan, Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region, China
Email: yanling@graduate.utm.my

Aida Binti A. Rahman

Language Academy, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, 81310, Johor Bahru, Malaysia
Email: aidahman@utm.my

Lee Huan Yik

Language Academy, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, 81310, Johor Bahru, Malaysia
Email: huanyiklee@utm.my

DOI Link: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARPED/v15-i1/27473>

Published Online: 23 January 2026

Abstract

This integrative conceptual review synthesises current scholarship on teacher agency in the context of China's Curriculum-based Ideological and Moral Education (CIME) reform, with particular attention to College English teaching. Drawing on ecological, sociocultural, identity-based, and value-oriented perspectives, the review shows that teacher agency under CIME is a dynamic, interpretive, and contextually mediated process shaped by the interaction of personal beliefs, institutional structures, and broader cultural–discursive frameworks. The enactment of agency involves teachers' interpretive judgment, negotiation of pedagogical and value-oriented expectations, emotional meaning-making, and adaptive classroom practices. The review proposes a three-level ecological system—personal, institutional, and cultural–discursive—to explain the enabling and constraining conditions shaping agency in this reform environment. By integrating insights across diverse strands of literature, the review extends international understandings of teacher agency to ideologically framed curriculum reforms and highlights the need to consider value orientations, identity negotiations, and discursive contexts in future analyses. Implications are offered for teacher

education, institutional leadership, and policy development, alongside directions for future research.

Keywords: Teacher Agency, Curriculum-Based Ideological and Moral Education (Cime), College English Teaching, Ecological Perspective, Policy Enactment, Value-Oriented Curriculum Reform

Introduction

Teacher agency has become a pivotal concept for understanding how educators respond to curriculum change across diverse educational systems. International scholarship increasingly views teachers not as passive implementers of policy, but as active, reflective professionals whose actions emerge from the interplay of personal histories, professional identities, and socio-material working conditions (Edwards, 2017; Priestley et al., 2013). Studies on reform implementation consistently show that teachers' responses—ranging from enthusiastic adoption to selective adaptation or minimal compliance—depend on their capacity to exercise situated judgment within contextual affordances and constraints (Lasky, 2005; Sachs, 2016).

Within China's higher education sector, teacher agency has gained renewed relevance under the Curriculum-based Ideological and Moral Education (CIME) reform. As a nationwide initiative, CIME requires university teachers across disciplines, including College English educators, to integrate moral and ideological orientations into everyday subject teaching (Han, 2021; Huang, 2022). Unlike reforms focused primarily on pedagogical or technical adjustments, CIME is explicitly value-oriented: it calls for the harmonisation of disciplinary knowledge with broader educational goals emphasising cultural confidence, civic responsibility, and moral development (Li, 2023; Zhang, 2023). This positions College English teachers at a unique intersection of language pedagogy, curriculum governance, and value-oriented instruction, introducing both new opportunities and professional challenges (Wang, 2022; Sun & Shen, 2023).

Despite the rapid growth of CIME-related publications, the existing literature remains fragmented. Many studies focus on curriculum models, classroom practices, or policy interpretation, but relatively few examine how teachers make sense of, negotiate, and enact CIME in their everyday professional lives (Tao & Gao, 2017; Cheng & Wei, 2021). Moreover, although the term "teacher agency" is increasingly used, its theoretical foundations are unevenly developed; some studies draw on ecological perspectives without fully engaging their relational, temporal, and contextual dimensions (Priestley et al., 2015; Biesta & Tedder, 2007). International research on moral, citizenship, and politically sensitive reforms suggests that identity, legitimacy, emotion, and discursive context play powerful roles in shaping teachers' agency, yet these aspects remain underexamined in CIME scholarship (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Mockler, 2011).

Against this background, this review seeks to synthesise current conceptual and empirical research on teacher agency in the CIME context, with a particular focus on College English teaching. It addresses three guiding questions:

- (1) How is teacher agency conceptualised within CIME-related research?
- (2) How do College English teachers enact agency when interpreting and implementing CIME?

(3) What personal, institutional, and cultural–discursive conditions shape teacher agency within this reform environment?

Building on these guiding questions, the review integrates insights from ecological, sociocultural, identity-based, and value-oriented perspectives to analyse the multilayered processes through which teacher agency is conceptualised and enacted in the CIME context.

This review offers the first integrative conceptual synthesis of teacher agency specifically within China’s CIME reform, with focused attention to the distinctive challenges and affordances experienced by College English teachers. Its novelty lies in synthesising ecological, sociocultural, identity-based, and value-oriented perspectives to propose a coherent, multi-level explanation of how teacher agency operates in ideologically framed curriculum reforms.

The review contributes to the social sciences by:

- (1) Extending ecological models of teacher agency into an ideologically infused policy environment—an underexplored area in global agency research.
- (2) Highlighting identity, values, and emotions as central mediators of agency in value-oriented reforms, thereby enriching existing frameworks.
- (3) Proposing a three-level ecological system (personal–institutional–discursive) that advances theoretical understanding of policy enactment in moral–political curriculum contexts.
- (4) Providing a conceptual foundation for future empirical research on language teachers’ agency in China and comparable political–educational systems.

Together, these contributions strengthen theoretical understanding of teacher agency in value-laden reforms and situate the CIME case within broader international discussions on professionalism, curriculum governance, and educational change.

Conceptualisations of Teacher Agency in the Cime Context

Review Approach

Given the interdisciplinary and theoretically diverse nature of teacher agency research, this article adopts an integrative conceptual review approach. Integrative reviews enable scholars to synthesise theoretical constructs and empirical insights from studies that vary considerably in methodology, context, and conceptual framing (Torraco, 2005; Whitemore & Knafel, 2005). This approach is particularly suited to the CIME context, where scholarship draws from ecological theory, sociocultural frameworks, identity research, policy enactment studies, and value-oriented curriculum literature.

A purposeful and iterative search strategy guided the review. Studies were identified through databases such as Web of Science, Scopus, ERIC, Google Scholar, and CNKI using keywords including teacher agency, policy enactment, curriculum reform, ideological and moral education, and College English. Reference chaining and forward/backward citation tracking supplemented database searches. Consistent with integrative review principles, sources were selected based on conceptual relevance and explanatory value rather than strict methodological filtering (Snyder, 2019).

Data analysis followed the four-stage process proposed by Whittemore and Knafelz (2005):

- (a) data reduction,
- (b) data display,
- (c) thematic categorisation, and
- (d) integrative synthesis.

This process enabled the identification of key conceptual patterns and tensions across the literature, which were subsequently organised around core themes such as conceptualisations of agency, enactment processes, and ecological conditions. These themes informed the development of the three-level ecological framework proposed in later sections.

Conceptualisations of Teacher Agency

Teacher agency has been conceptualised through several influential theoretical perspectives, each highlighting different dimensions of how teachers act, decide, and influence educational practice. Internationally, the ecological model has become particularly prominent. This model conceptualises agency as an emergent achievement, arising from the interplay of teachers' past experiences, present contextual conditions, and future orientations (Biesta & Tedder, 2007; Priestley et al., 2015). Agency, from this viewpoint, is neither a personality trait nor a fixed capacity; rather, it is enacted within particular social, material, and temporal configurations.

Complementing ecological views, sociocultural perspectives foreground the mediating role of tools, discourses, norms, and cultural practices in shaping teacher action (Holland et al., 1998; Edwards, 2017). Identity-based frameworks add further nuance by highlighting how teachers' sense of self, professional legitimacy, and moral purpose influence their capacity to act (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Mockler, 2011). Together, these perspectives point to the relational and context-dependent nature of teacher agency.

In the CIME context, however, conceptualisations of agency reveal several gaps. Although many Chinese scholars reference ecological concepts (e.g., Cheng & Wei, 2021; Tao & Gao, 2017), the operationalisation of these frameworks is often limited. Applications tend to invoke ecological terminology without fully engaging with the model's emphasis on temporality, relationality, and contextual contingency.

Moreover, CIME introduces a distinct value-oriented dimension that complicates teacher agency beyond typical pedagogical or curricular concerns. College English teachers must negotiate multiple expectations: communicative language teaching principles, institutional governance structures, and the moral–ideological orientations of the reform (Li, 2023; Wang, 2022). This intersection brings forward identity tensions and interpretive challenges that remain under-theorised in existing research.

Some domestic studies conceptualise teacher agency primarily as professional responsibility or policy fulfilment (Han, 2021; Zhang, 2023). While this reflects the moral seriousness with which many teachers approach CIME, it differs from international conceptualisations that foreground reflective, adaptive, and transformative aspects of agency (Sachs, 2016). As a result, more subtle forms of agency, such as strategic adaptation, selective alignment, or creative mediation, are less frequently captured.

International scholarship on value-oriented and politically sensitive reforms highlights how broader discursive and ideological contexts shape teachers' professional judgment, emotional labour, and identity positioning (Lasky, 2005; Mockler, 2011). Yet such discursive influences receive comparatively less attention in CIME-related discussions (Huang, 2022). This gap suggests the need to incorporate cultural–political and discursive conditions more explicitly into conceptualisations of agency.

Overall, current scholarship reflects a hybrid but uneven conceptual landscape. While ecological, sociocultural, and identity-focused ideas are present, deeper theoretical integration is needed to fully account for the ideological and value-laden nature of CIME. The synthesis in this review responds to this need by proposing a more comprehensive multi-level framework for analysing teacher agency in the CIME context.

Enactment of Teacher Agency in the Cime Context

The enactment of teacher agency within the CIME context emerges as a dynamic and situated process shaped by teachers' interpretations of policy, identity positioning, pedagogical judgment, and emotional experience. Consistent with ecological perspectives, agency is not treated as a static attribute but as an achievement that arises through teachers' moment-to-moment engagement with the conditions of their work (Biesta & Tedder, 2007; Priestley et al., 2015). Across the literature, three interrelated dimensions stand out: how teachers interpret CIME policy, how they negotiate pedagogical, ideological, and identity-related tensions, and how they adapt classroom practices in response.

Interpreting and Making Sense of CIME Policy

A recurring theme in empirical studies is that enactment begins with interpretive agency—the ways in which teachers read, filter, and make sense of CIME policy texts (Cheng & Wei, 2021; Li, 2023). Given that CIME documents often articulate broad value orientations rather than detailed pedagogical procedures, teachers are required to translate general principles into discipline-specific practices. In doing so, they frequently draw on their own beliefs, institutional cues, and collegial discussions to form workable understandings of what counts as “appropriate” ideological and moral integration in College English classrooms (Huang, 2022; Wang, 2022).

Several studies indicate that teachers distinguish between different forms of engagement. On the one hand, they may pursue substantive integration, where CIME goals are woven meaningfully into classroom activities. On the other hand, they may adopt more symbolic or procedural responses when institutional expectations emphasise visible alignment with policy without providing sufficient pedagogical guidance (Zhang, 2023; Sun & Shen, 2023). This pattern resonates with international work showing that teachers rarely implement reforms in a literal or uniform manner; instead, they actively reinterpret and recontextualise policy in light of existing pedagogical frameworks and identity commitments (Lasky, 2005; Edwards, 2017).

In the CIME context, such interpretive work is undertaken within an environment where value orientations and disciplinary goals intersect. Teachers' interpretations are shaped not only by curricular guidelines but also by their sense of students' needs, disciplinary traditions, and the

discursive norms of their institutions. This underscores that teacher agency in policy enactment is as much about meaning-making as it is about implementation.

Negotiating Pedagogical, Ideological, and Identity Tensions

CIME places College English teachers at the intersection of linguistic, communicative, and value-oriented expectations. The literature consistently points to a set of pedagogical–ideological tensions that influence how agency is enacted (Huang, 2022; Li, 2023). These tensions often arise between:

- (1) Communicative language teaching (CLT) principles and the integration of explicit value orientations;
- (2) Established professional identities as language teachers and expanded roles as moral or ideological educators;
- (3) Classroom-level pedagogical autonomy and institutional or policy expectations.

Studies suggest that teachers navigate these tensions through ongoing identity work—reconciling their self-understandings as language professionals with broader educational aims associated with CIME (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Mockler, 2011). For some, alignment between personal educational beliefs and CIME goals supports proactive and confident engagement (Han, 2021). For others, uncertainty about how best to integrate value-laden content alongside language learning leads to more measured, experimental, or cautious approaches (Sun & Shen, 2023).

Agency in this context often takes the form of boundary work, where teachers seek to maintain the integrity of language learning while incorporating CIME elements in ways they consider pedagogically coherent. This reflects international findings that teachers frequently exercise agency through incremental adjustments and negotiated compromises rather than dramatic shifts (Sachs, 2016; Priestley et al., 2013).

Classroom-Level Adaptations, Innovations, and Strategic Responses

At the level of classroom practice, teachers enact agency through a range of adaptive strategies that aim to integrate CIME with language learning priorities. Empirical studies document several recurrent forms of practice:

Embedding value-related themes into authentic language tasks, such as reading passages, discussions, or writing assignments, so that ideological orientations are addressed within communicative activities (Zhang, 2023; Wang, 2022).

Connecting CIME topics to students' lived experiences, interests, or contemporary social issues, thereby making value-oriented content more accessible and dialogic (Huang, 2022).

Reframing ideological content through lenses such as intercultural communication, critical thinking, or global citizenship, which allows teachers to align CIME aims with established goals of language education (Li, 2023).

Using more implicit or indirect forms of integration, particularly when teachers perceive classroom diversity, student sensitivity, or contextual complexity that calls for a careful and nuanced approach (Sun & Shen, 2023).

These practices illustrate that agency is exercised not only in deciding whether to implement CIME but also in how to integrate it into everyday teaching. Teachers mediate among policy aims, disciplinary norms, and classroom dynamics, often seeking solutions that preserve pedagogical coherence while responding to institutional and policy expectations. In some cases, CIME also provides an impetus for innovative practices, prompting teachers to design new tasks or course themes that link language learning with wider social and ethical questions (Han, 2019).

However, the extent and nature of such innovations are closely related to contextual conditions. Supportive institutional environments, collegial collaboration, and professional recognition tend to encourage more exploratory and generative forms of agency (Edwards, 2017; Day, 2006), whereas heavier workloads or more procedural interpretations of CIME may limit teachers' scope for experimentation.

Emotional Experiences as a Dimension of Agency

An emerging but important strand of research highlights the role of teacher emotions in shaping how agency is enacted under CIME (Sun & Shen, 2023; Huang, 2022). Teachers report a wide range of emotional responses, such as commitment, interest, uncertainty, or concern, depending on how they understand CIME, how they perceive students' reactions, and how they evaluate the fit between reform expectations and their own values.

International scholarship on teacher emotions suggests that agency is closely connected to how teachers interpret, manage, and act upon their emotional experiences, particularly in contexts involving value considerations or policy change (Lasky, 2005; Schutz & Zembylas, 2009). In the CIME context, emotions can motivate teachers to engage more deeply with reform goals, to seek collegial support and professional learning, or to adjust their strategies where they perceive tensions between multiple aims. Emotional experiences thus form part of the practical–evaluative dimension of agency, influencing the choices teachers make in navigating reform demands.

Summary

Taken together, the literature portrays the enactment of teacher agency in CIME as a multi-layered, negotiated, and contextually shaped process. Agency is exercised as teachers interpret policy, negotiate pedagogical and identity-related tensions, make classroom-level adaptations, and respond emotionally to the opportunities and challenges they encounter. Their responses range from substantive integration and innovation to more measured or selective engagement, depending on how they perceive the relationship between CIME orientations, disciplinary priorities, institutional environments, and their own professional beliefs.

These patterns broadly align with international research on teacher agency, while also underscoring the particular significance of value orientations and discursive contexts in CIME. They point to the need to analyse agency not only at the level of individual teachers but also in relation to the institutional and cultural–discursive ecologies that frame their work—an issue explored further in the next section on conditions shaping teacher agency.

Conditions Shaping Teacher Agency in the CIME Context

Teacher agency in the CIME context is shaped through a constellation of conditions that operate at personal, institutional, and broader cultural–discursive levels. Consistent with ecological perspectives (Biesta & Tedder, 2007; Priestley et al., 2015), these conditions do not determine teachers' actions in a linear way; rather, they create varying degrees of affordance and constraint within which teachers interpret, evaluate, and enact reform expectations. Research on College English teaching under CIME reveals that teachers navigate a multi-layered environment in which personal beliefs, institutional structures, and societal discourses interact to shape both opportunities for professional judgment and the space available for pedagogical innovation.

Personal Factors

Professional Beliefs and Value Orientations

Teachers' conceptions of the aims of English education, the purposes of moral education, and the perceived relationship between the two strongly influence how they interpret and implement CIME (Wang, 2022; Zhang, 2023). Teachers whose personal values resonate with the moral and cultural orientations of the reform tend to demonstrate a stronger sense of direction and confidence, leading to more generative forms of agency such as proactive planning or creative integration (Han, 2019). In contrast, teachers who identify more strongly with communicative, intercultural, or liberal–humanistic traditions sometimes experience ambivalence or tension, which may result in more measured, reflective, or selective engagement (Li, 2023; Huang, 2022).

These findings echo international literature indicating that when teachers' values align with policy aims, agency is strengthened, whereas partial alignment or uncertainty tends to foster more cautious or exploratory forms of action (Lasky, 2005; Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). Importantly, such patterns do not imply opposition to reform; rather, they reflect teachers' ongoing negotiation of multiple educational commitments.

Knowledge, Competence, and Pedagogical Preparedness

Teachers' sense of preparedness, both in terms of understanding CIME's value orientations and in translating them into pedagogically meaningful practices, also shapes their agency. Some English teachers report uncertainty about how to interpret ideological concepts or about relationally integrating them with specific linguistic skills (Zhang, 2023; Sun & Shen, 2023). Limited access to concrete pedagogical models or examples may reduce teachers' willingness to experiment or exercise discretionary judgment.

Such findings are consistent with broader research highlighting professional knowledge as a key enabling condition for teacher agency. Teachers who feel competent and well supported are more likely to adopt reflective and innovative approaches (Edwards, 2017; Day, 2006), while those facing conceptual or pedagogical uncertainties tend to adopt more incremental or exploratory strategies.

Professional Identity and Perceived Legitimacy

Professional identity shapes teachers' sense of purpose and legitimacy, thereby influencing their agency in value-oriented reforms. Some College English teachers view ideological education as somewhat outside their disciplinary domain, leading to identity-related tensions

or role negotiation (Li, 2023). Teachers who primarily see themselves as language specialists may express concern that value-oriented tasks could dilute linguistic goals or shift the focus of English education (Huang, 2022).

International literature similarly emphasises that teachers' agency is closely tied to their sense of professional legitimacy: when teachers feel that reform requirements align with their professional identity, agency is more proactive; when alignment is partial, agency often becomes more reflective, mediated, or selective (Mockler, 2011; Sachs, 2016). These patterns are evident in the CIME context as teachers reconcile broader educational aims with their disciplinary commitments.

Institutional Factors

Policy Clarity, Curriculum Design, and Evaluation Systems

Teachers work within institutional environments where policy interpretation, curriculum requirements, and evaluation mechanisms significantly shape agency. Research indicates that variations in the clarity of CIME guidelines across institutions can create interpretive uncertainty (Cheng & Wei, 2021; Huang, 2022). When policies provide overarching principles but limited discipline-specific guidance, teachers rely more heavily on local understandings, departmental priorities, and personal judgment to determine appropriate forms of integration.

Evaluation systems also play a critical role. In cases where performance indicators emphasise visible representation of CIME elements, teachers may feel encouraged to demonstrate alignment in ways that are procedural rather than pedagogically embedded. This mirrors international findings that accountability pressures can narrow the space for professional discretion (Priestley et al., 2013; Mockler, 2011), shaping the balance between substantive and symbolic engagement with reform aims.

Leadership Practices and Administrative Expectations

Leadership practices—particularly the extent to which institutional leaders support dialogue, recognise teacher expertise, and encourage pedagogical exploration—have a substantial influence on agency. Supportive leadership fosters trust and promotes an atmosphere where teachers feel that their professional judgment is valued (Edwards, 2017; Day, 2006). In these environments, teachers report having greater confidence to experiment with curricula, develop integrative activities, and collaborate with colleagues.

Conversely, when administrative priorities emphasise institutional consistency, risk avoidance, or procedural uniformity, teachers may feel encouraged to adopt more standardised or performance-focused approaches (Han, 2019). Such patterns are consistent with research on policy enactment that highlights leadership as a key factor shaping teachers' interpretive and pedagogical space (Braun et al., 2010; Ozga, 2000).

Professional Development and Resource Support

Professional development opportunities significantly influence teachers' capacity to interpret and enact CIME. In many institutions, training focuses on policy transmission rather than pedagogical design, providing teachers with broad ideological rationales but limited

classroom-oriented guidance (Zhang, 2023). Teachers often express a need for more practice-oriented and subject-specific examples that align with English language education.

International research suggests that professional development that is collaborative, sustained, and inquiry-oriented, rather than compliance-driven, promotes stronger teacher agency (Sachs, 2016; Edwards, 2015). Access to high-quality materials, collaborative learning communities, and opportunities for joint curriculum planning similarly create conditions for more reflective and innovative enactment.

Workload, Class Size, and Organisational Pressures

Teachers' working conditions—including teaching loads, class sizes, administrative responsibilities, and time allocation—shape the practical space available for reflective and creative engagement. High workloads or limited time for lesson preparation may encourage teachers to adopt “minimal-effort” integration strategies in order to meet formal requirements (Cheng & Wei, 2021; Sun & Shen, 2023).

Such structural pressures align with international evidence showing that intensified workloads reduce opportunities for collegial collaboration, planning, and innovation, thereby constraining the exercise of agency (Lasky, 2005; Sachs, 2016). In the CIME context, these conditions can influence not only the depth but also the form of integration teachers consider feasible.

Cultural and Ideological Factors

School and Departmental Culture

Institutional culture plays a critical role in shaping teachers' interpretive and pedagogical flexibility. Departments characterised by collaborative norms, regular dialogue, and open discussion of teaching challenges often foster strong collective agency (Huang, 2022). Such cultures allow teachers to explore alternative approaches, share concerns, and co-construct strategies for integrating CIME meaningfully.

By contrast, environments that emphasise procedural consistency or uniform interpretation may encourage more standardised responses. This does not necessarily diminish teachers' commitment but can narrow the range of approaches they feel comfortable adopting, especially when policy messages are interpreted as requiring caution or uniformity (Sun & Shen, 2023).

(2) Peer networks and professional communities

Teachers' informal and formal professional interactions contribute important discursive and emotional resources that shape agency. Collegial communities often provide spaces for sharing interpretive dilemmas, developing joint strategies, and receiving affirmation for pedagogical experimentation (Zhang, 2023). Such collaborative exchanges have been shown internationally to enhance teacher agency by broadening teachers' interpretive repertoires and reinforcing their sense of professional legitimacy (Edwards, 2017; Priestley et al., 2013).

(3) Broader ideological discourses and political context

CIME is situated within broader national discourses that emphasise moral development, cultural identity, and civic responsibility. These discourses provide teachers with important

orientations for understanding the aims of the reform. Teachers' enactment of CIME often reflects their efforts to harmonise these value orientations with the goals of English language education, leading to context-sensitive decisions about language choice, topic framing, and classroom interaction (Han, 2019; Li, 2023).

The broader policy environment encourages accurate and value-aligned pedagogical expressions, which may lead teachers to adopt more intentional and thoughtfully calibrated approaches to classroom delivery. Findings from international research on value-oriented reforms similarly suggest that value-laden contexts require teachers to navigate multiple considerations—including pedagogical appropriateness, student engagement, and institutional expectations—as they interpret and enact policies (Mockler, 2011; Sachs, 2016).

Summary

Taken together, research indicates that teacher agency in the CIME context emerges from an intricate ecological system in which personal beliefs, institutional structures, and cultural–discursive frameworks intersect. Some conditions—such as value alignment, supportive leadership, and collaborative communities—provide affordances that enable generative and reflective forms of agency. Others—such as policy ambiguity, intense workloads, or procedural interpretations—shape more measured or conservative approaches.

Understanding these layered enabling and constraining factors is essential for interpreting teachers' diverse responses to CIME and for informing future policies, institutional support mechanisms, and professional development initiatives that aim to strengthen teacher agency in value-oriented reforms.

Discussion and Synthesis

The review demonstrates that teacher agency in the CIME context arises from a multilayered interplay of personal orientations, institutional environments, and cultural–discursive conditions. Synthesising conceptual and empirical insights across the literature reveals three interrelated arguments that deepen our understanding of teacher agency in value-oriented curriculum reforms and offer contributions applicable within China and internationally.

Teacher Agency in CIME as a Value-Oriented and Contextually Mediated Construct

A central insight from the review is that teacher agency in the CIME context is fundamentally value-oriented. Unlike reforms that focus primarily on pedagogy, curriculum structure, or assessment, CIME emphasizes moral and cultural orientations, requiring teachers to integrate value-related goals into subject teaching (Han, 2019; Sun & Shen, 2023). This positions agency not merely as the exercise of pedagogical discretion, but as a process of interpreting reform intentions, aligning them with disciplinary norms, and making context-sensitive decisions about classroom practice.

Comparisons with international research show both convergence and divergence. Similar to studies in citizenship, character, and civic education, teachers in the CIME context navigate the interpretive, ethical, and contextual dimensions of value-oriented reforms (Lasky, 2005; Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). Yet CIME also presents unique features: value orientations are embedded within a national policy framework that provides overarching educational aims while allowing considerable variation in discipline-specific interpretation. As a result,

teachers' agency becomes contextually mediated, shaped by personal commitments, institutional expectations, and cultural discourses that inform how they make sense of policy.

This observation extends ecological framings of agency by illustrating that teachers' "ecological conditions" include not only material and relational factors but also value alignment, professional legitimacy, and discursive orientations. These elements have received less emphasis in agency research rooted in Western contexts but are critical for understanding agency in value-oriented and ideologically framed reforms (Mockler, 2011; Edwards, 2017).

Agency Enactment as a Negotiation Between Pedagogical and Value-Oriented Expectations

The review highlights that teachers enact agency through a continuous negotiation of pedagogical goals, disciplinary commitments, and reform expectations. This negotiation is neither oppositional nor mechanical; rather, it reflects teachers' efforts to harmonise multiple aims while responding to classroom realities. Teachers draw on personal beliefs, identity commitments, pedagogical knowledge, and interpretive judgment to determine how CIME-related elements can be meaningfully integrated into English teaching (Wang, 2022; Zhang, 2023).

The literature identifies several recurring modes of enactment:

- **Substantive Integration**

Teachers who perceive strong alignment between personal educational values and CIME orientations engage proactively and creatively in lesson design (Han, 2019). They often frame ideological elements within broader communicative, intercultural, or reflective learning goals.

- **Measured or Selective Adaptation**

Teachers who encounter conceptual uncertainties, multiple instructional aims, or diverse student needs tend to adopt more iterative and context-responsive strategies (Sun & Shen, 2023). These strategies allow teachers to address value-oriented aims while ensuring pedagogical coherence.

- **Innovative Hybridisation**

Some teachers integrate CIME themes through novel or interdisciplinary approaches—such as intercultural communication, critical reading, or global citizenship education—broadening the pedagogical possibilities for value-oriented learning (Huang, 2022; Li, 2023).

These patterns reflect international findings that teacher agency is enacted through interpretation, adaptation, and identity work rather than through direct or literal implementation of policy (Priestley et al., 2015; Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). In the CIME context, teachers' emotional experiences—such as enthusiasm, cautiousness, or deliberation—further influence how they navigate these layered expectations, underscoring the importance of emotional agency in value-oriented reforms (Schutz & Zembylas, 2009).

A Three-Level Ecological System Shaping Teacher Agency in CIME

Synthesising the literature indicates that teacher agency in CIME is shaped through a three-level ecological system comprising personal, institutional, and cultural–discursive influences.

(1) Personal Level

Teachers' prior experiences, professional identities, beliefs about English education, and emotional orientations shape how they interpret and prioritise reform goals. Alignment between personal and policy values supports generative agency (Han, 2019), while differences often lead to reflective, negotiated, or cautious forms of engagement (Li, 2023).

(2) Institutional Level

Policy clarity, departmental expectations, leadership practices, evaluation mechanisms, and professional development opportunities structure the practical space for agency. Institutions that encourage discussion, autonomy, and shared meaning-making tend to expand teachers' interpretive flexibility and pedagogical options (Edwards, 2017; Day, 2006). In contrast, environments emphasizing procedural consistency or visible compliance may narrow the range of approaches teachers feel able to adopt (Cheng & Wei, 2021; Sun & Shen, 2023).

(3) Cultural–Discursive Level

Broader societal discourses around cultural confidence, identity formation, and moral development shape teachers' understandings of pedagogical legitimacy. These discourses guide how teachers frame content, language choices, and interactional patterns in CIME-related lessons (Han, 2019). This level is particularly salient in CIME compared with many other reforms, reinforcing the importance of integrating discursive and value-oriented dimensions into agency frameworks (Mockler, 2011; Sachs, 2016).

Together, these three levels demonstrate that teacher agency in CIME does not reside solely in individual capacity. Instead, it emerges through the interaction of personal dispositions, institutional structures, and cultural orientations, forming a complex ecology that shapes teachers' interpretive and pedagogical possibilities.

Contributions to International Teacher Agency Scholarship

This review contributes to global discussions on teacher agency in several ways:

(1) Extending Ecological Models to Value-Oriented Reforms

The CIME case shows that ecological conditions include ideological and discursive orientations, not just material or relational factors. This foregrounds the importance of value alignment, legitimacy, and interpretive space in understanding teacher agency.

(2) Highlighting Identity and Emotion as Central to Agency

Teachers' identity-positioning and emotional meaning-making play a central role in shaping their engagement with CIME. This supports international arguments that agency cannot be understood without attention to teachers' sense of purpose, legitimacy, and emotional landscapes (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Schutz & Zembylas, 2009).

(3) Proposing a Three-Level Ecological Framework

The multi-level ecological model developed through this integrative review offers a nuanced structure for analysing agency in value-oriented reforms. It may also inform comparative research in contexts where teachers navigate cultural, civic, or ideological aims.

Implications for Research and Practice

Synthesising the literature suggests several implications:

Theoretical integration: Future studies should adopt multi-theoretical frameworks that combine ecological, sociocultural, institutional, and discursive perspectives.

Policy design: Policies should balance coherence with interpretive flexibility, recognising teachers' need for professional discretion in aligning value-oriented aims with subject goals.

Teacher education: Professional development should be dialogic, collaborative, and practice-oriented, supporting teachers in negotiating the conceptual and emotional dimensions of CIME.

Institutional support: Schools and departments should foster cultures of trust, discussion, and experimentation, enabling teachers to exercise meaningful agency.

These implications underscore that strengthening teacher agency is essential not only for enhancing CIME implementation but also for sustaining pedagogical integrity and supporting teachers' long-term professional growth.

Conclusion

This integrative conceptual review examined how teacher agency has been conceptualised, enacted, and shaped within the context of China's Curriculum-based Ideological and Moral Education (CIME) reform, with a particular focus on College English teaching. Synthesising insights from ecological, sociocultural, identity-based, and value-oriented perspectives yields several overarching conclusions that deepen our understanding of teacher agency in ideologically framed curriculum reform.

First, the review highlights that teacher agency in CIME must be understood within the value-oriented aims of the reform. Because CIME embeds cultural, moral, and educational orientations into discipline-specific teaching, English teachers engage in complex interpretive, ethical, and emotional work. This moves agency beyond technical or instructional decision-making and extends ecological understandings by demonstrating that value alignment, professional legitimacy, and discursive orientations form part of the ecological conditions shaping agency (Han, 2019; Sun & Shen, 2023). These dynamics underscore that teacher agency in CIME is inherently value-laden and contextually mediated.

Second, teachers enact agency through diverse strategies—ranging from substantive integration to selective adaptation and innovative hybridisation—depending on how they balance pedagogical coherence with value-oriented expectations. These enactments reflect teachers' ongoing negotiation of disciplinary goals, institutional expectations, interpretive space, and classroom needs. Such patterns resonate with international scholarship emphasising the centrality of interpretation, identity, and practical-evaluative judgment in curriculum enactment (Priestley et al., 2013; Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). Within CIME, the emotional dimensions of this work further shape how teachers approach reform implementation, illustrating the importance of emotional agency in value-oriented contexts.

Third, the review identifies a multilayered ecological system shaping teacher agency. Personal orientations—including beliefs, identities, and emotions—interact with institutional structures such as leadership practices, evaluation mechanisms, and professional development opportunities. These, in turn, are situated within broader cultural–discursive frameworks that guide understandings of pedagogical appropriateness and value integration.

This three-level ecological system demonstrates that agency emerges from the interplay of individual, organisational, and cultural influences rather than residing solely within the individual. As such, supporting meaningful agency requires interventions across all three levels.

Taken together, these findings contribute to international scholarship by illustrating how teacher agency operates in value-oriented and ideologically framed curriculum reforms, an area underrepresented in global research. The CIME context offers a distinctive case that shows how teachers navigate value-based aims within discipline-specific pedagogies, adding nuance to existing ecological and sociocultural frameworks. As global education systems increasingly integrate values, citizenship, and identity-building goals into language teaching, insights from this review underscore the importance of understanding teacher agency as both pedagogically grounded and discursively mediated.

Future research would benefit from longitudinal and comparative designs that capture how agency evolves over time and across institutional and regional contexts. Multi-method approaches, integrating interviews, observations, document analysis, and narrative inquiry, could further illuminate how teachers interpret, negotiate, and enact value-oriented policies in practice. Strengthening teacher agency remains essential not only for sustaining high-quality CIME implementation but also for promoting professional integrity, reflective autonomy, and teacher wellbeing in dynamic educational landscapes.

References

- Beauchamp, C., & Thomas, L. (2009). Understanding teacher identity: An overview of issues in the literature and implications for teacher education. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 39(2), 175–189.
- Biesta, G., & Tedder, M. (2007). Agency and learning in the lifecourse: Towards an ecological perspective. *Studies in the Education of Adults*, 39(2), 132–149.
- Braun, A., Maguire, M., & Ball, S. J. (2010). Policy enactments in the UK secondary school: Examining policy, practice and school positioning. *Journal of Education Policy*, 25(4), 547–560.
- Cheng, J. Y., & Wei, L. (2021). Individual agency and changing language education policy in China: Reactions to the new “Guidelines on College English Teaching”. *Current Issues in Language Planning*, 22(1–2), 117–135.
- Day, C., Kington, A., Stobart, G., & Sammons, P. (2006). The personal and professional selves of teachers: Stable and unstable identities. *British Educational Research Journal*, 32(4), 601–616.
- Edwards, A. (2017). *Working relationally in and across practices: A cultural-historical approach to collaboration*. Cambridge University Press.
- Han, X. Z. (2019). 深化课程思政建设的几个关键问题 [Several key issues in deepening curriculum-based ideological and political education]. *思想理论教育导刊* [Guide to Ideological and Theoretical Education], 7, 88–93.
- Holland, D., Lachicotte, W., Jr., Skinner, D., & Cain, C. (1998). *Identity and agency in cultural worlds*. Harvard University Press.
- Huang, G. W. (2022). 新文科背景下外语教育的价值重构与路径拓展 [Reconstructing the value of foreign language education and expanding its pathways under the New Liberal Arts initiative]. *外语界* [Foreign Language World], 195(3), 2–9.

- Lasky, S. (2005). A sociocultural approach to understanding teacher identity, agency and professional vulnerability in a context of secondary school reform. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 21(8), 899–916.
- Li, X. L. (2023). A theoretical review on the interplay among EFL teachers' professional identity, agency, and positioning. *Heliyon*, 9(4), e15510.
- Mockler, N. (2011). Beyond 'what works': Understanding teacher identity as a practical and political tool. *Teachers and Teaching*, 17(5), 517–528.
- Ozga, J. (2000). *Policy research in educational settings: Contested terrain*. Open University Press.
- Priestley, M., Biesta, G., & Robinson, S. (2013). Teachers as agents of change: Teacher agency and emerging models of curriculum. In M. Priestley & G. Biesta (Eds.), *Reinventing the curriculum: New trends in curriculum policy and practice* (pp. 187–206). Bloomsbury.
- Priestley, M., Biesta, G., & Robinson, S. (2015). *Teacher agency: An ecological approach*. Bloomsbury.
- Sachs, J. (2016). Teacher professionalism: Why are we still talking about it? *Teachers and Teaching*, 22(4), 413–425.
- Schutz, P. A., & Zembylas, M. (Eds.). (2009). *Advances in teacher emotion research: The impact on teachers' lives*. Springer.
- Snyder, H. (2019). Literature review as a research methodology: An overview and guidelines. *Journal of Business Research*, 104, 333–339.
- Sun, Y., & Shen, Q. (2023). 大学英语课程规划中课程思政理念的系统融入 [Systematic integration of curriculum-based ideological and moral education into College English curriculum planning]. *外语界 [Foreign Language World]*, 206(2), 15–24.
- Tao, J., & Gao, X. (2017). Teacher agency and identity commitment in curricular reform. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 63, 346–355.
- Torraco, R. J. (2005). Writing integrative literature reviews: Guidelines and examples. *Human Resource Development Review*, 4(3), 356–367.
- Wang, L. (2022). English language teacher agency in response to curriculum reform in China: An ecological approach. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13, 935038.
- Whittemore, R., & Knaf, K. (2005). The integrative review: Updated methodology. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 52(5), 546–553.
- Zhang, B. (2023). Practical Research of Ideological and Political Education in College English Course under the Background of New Liberal Arts. *OALib*, 10(11), 1-18.