

Implementing Printmaking in Junior High Schools under the New Curriculum: Practices, Challenges, and Pedagogical Responses

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DOI Link: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARPED/v14-i3/26224>

Published Online: 30 August 2025

Abstract

Printmaking, an integral part of Chinese traditional arts and crafts with a history spanning over a thousand years—from the woodblock prints of the Tang Dynasty to the iconic Yangliuqing New Year paintings—aligns with the new curriculum standards' core goals: inheriting socialist advanced culture, revolutionary culture, and excellent traditional culture. Beyond cultural transmission, it fosters junior high school students' observational skills, practical abilities, and creative thinking through hands-on processes like carving, inking, and printing. This study investigates printmaking instruction in junior high schools under the new curriculum, focusing on its educational significance, current practices, challenges, and improvements. Data from semi-structured interviews with 8 teachers and 15 students were thematically analyzed. Findings indicate that while printmaking holds rich educational value—enhancing concentration, cultural identity, and problem-solving—it faces implementation barriers: uneven resource allocation (e.g., dedicated studios vs. improvised materials), insufficient teacher training in specialized techniques (e.g., woodcut), and time constraints limiting skill refinement. Recommendations to address these issues are proposed to enhance printmaking education effectiveness, ensuring it fulfills the new curriculum's vision of holistic art education.

Keywords: Printmaking Art, New Curriculum Standards, Junior High School Art Teaching, Cultural Inheritance, Educational Equity

Introduction

Fine arts education, a core component of primary and secondary school curricula, has undergone significant reforms under China's 2022 Compulsory Education Art Curriculum Standards. These standards emphasize "core literacy" — encompassing aesthetic perception, creative expression, cultural understanding, and social participation — with a specific

mandate to integrate traditional culture into art instruction (Ministry of Education, 2022). Printmaking, as a distinctive art form deeply rooted in Chinese history, embodies this mandate: for example, the folk woodblock prints of Suzhou and the revolutionary propaganda prints of the 1930s both reflect cultural continuity and innovation, making it an ideal vehicle to cultivate students' cultural identity (Wang & Liang, 2016).

Despite its cultural and pedagogical value, printmaking has received limited systematic attention in junior high schools. Prior research has primarily focused on art curriculum reform at a policy level (Hu, 2020) or on highlighting the cultural significance of printmaking as a traditional craft (Li, 2021; Wang & Liang, 2016). However, few studies have investigated how printmaking is actually implemented in classroom practice, especially from both teachers' and students' perspectives. This gap limits our understanding of the real challenges and opportunities that shape the effectiveness of printmaking education in the context of the new curriculum.

The phenomenon of interest in this study is therefore the frontline practice of printmaking education in junior high schools: how it is taught, what barriers exist, and what value it holds for students' holistic development. Addressing this phenomenon is crucial because without detailed, context-based insights, national curriculum goals risk remaining aspirational rather than actionable.

The motivation for conducting this study lies in the dual pressures faced by art education: on the one hand, the policy push for cultural inheritance and competency-based learning, and on the other hand, the practical difficulties of uneven resources, insufficient teacher training, and limited instructional time. By bridging this gap, this study not only provides empirical evidence about current practices but also offers concrete recommendations for improvement.

The contribution of this research is threefold. First, it enriches the literature by combining teacher and student perspectives on printmaking education, which are rarely examined together. Second, it highlights the specific challenges of implementing traditional art forms under contemporary curriculum reforms, thereby informing both policymakers and educators. Third, it contributes to the broader discourse on educational equity by showing how resource disparities influence cultural and creative learning opportunities.

This study therefore addresses a critical gap: while prior research has highlighted printmaking's value (Wang & Liang, 2016) or curriculum reform goals (Hu, 2020), few have explored frontline implementation from both teachers' and students' perspectives. By examining current practices, identifying challenges, and proposing feasible responses, this study aims to inform policy, curriculum design, and classroom practice — ultimately contributing to the sustainable development of art education under the new curriculum standards.

Literature Review

Existing research highlights printmaking's dual role in cultural transmission and skill development, while also identifying barriers to its implementation.

Cultural and Educational Value of Printmaking

Wang and Liang (2016) emphasize that printmaking's hands-on nature — requiring precision in carving and spatial awareness in designing — enhances students' fine motor skills and patience. More importantly, its connection to traditional techniques (e.g., the “jianhua” [simplified] style of rural woodblock prints) strengthens cultural identity by linking students to ancestral craftsmanship. For instance, a study by Li (2021) found that students who engaged with local printmaking traditions (e.g., Fengxiang New Year prints) showed increased interest in regional history and folklore.

Beyond skill-building, printmaking fosters creative thinking through iterative problem-solving. As Zhang (2020) notes, students often adjust their designs when faced with material limitations (e.g., using foam instead of linoleum), developing flexibility and innovation — key components of the new curriculum's “creative expression” core literacy.

Curriculum Reform and Implementation Challenges

The 2022 curriculum standards require art education to balance technical training with cultural literacy, making printmaking a valuable tool for this integration (Hu, 2020). However, Qian (2022) argues that the standards' vague guidelines for traditional art integration leave teachers uncertain about how to structure printmaking lessons. This ambiguity is compounded by resource disparities: urban schools with art budgets can afford specialized studios, while rural schools often rely on donated or improvised materials (Chen & Liu, 2023).

Teacher preparedness is another critical issue. Abbasi Asl et al. (2015) caution that even well-designed art programs fail without targeted teacher training. In China, many junior high school art teachers specialize in painting or calligraphy, with limited exposure to printmaking techniques (Zhao, 2020). A survey by the Chinese Society of Art Education (2021) found that only 32% of junior high school art teachers had received formal printmaking training, leading to over-reliance on simple techniques like monoprinting.

Equity and Access

Banks and Banks (2001) argue that equity in education, including access to art resources, is critical for inclusive learning. This frames our focus on resource disparities as a key challenge to equitable printmaking education. For example, students in wealthy districts may create multi-layered linocuts, while those in underfunded schools struggle to access basic ink and paper — a gap that undermines the new curriculum's commitment to “education for all” (Ministry of Education, 2022).

Research Methodology

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative design, using semi-structured interviews to explore printmaking instruction implementation. Qualitative methods are particularly suited to understanding participants' lived experiences and perspectives — essential for unpacking the nuanced challenges of art education (Blatter, 2008).

Research Questions

- Main Research Question (RQ): How is printmaking instruction implemented in junior high schools under the new curriculum standards, and what is its educational value?
- Sub-questions:
 - RQ1: What are the main practices and resource conditions in current junior high school printmaking teaching, and how do they vary across school contexts?
 - RQ2: What are the key challenges perceived by teachers and students, and what improvements are recommended based on their experiences?

Participants

Participants were purposively selected from 5 junior high schools in Jiangsu Province (3 urban, 2 rural) that offer printmaking as part of their art curriculum. This regional focus allowed for analysis of resource disparities within a single province, while ensuring diversity in school type. The sample included:

- 8 art teachers (6 female, 2 male) with 3–15 years of teaching experience. All had taught printmaking for at least 2 semesters, with 5 working in urban schools and 3 in rural schools.
- 15 students (9 female, 6 male) aged 13–15, who had completed at least 1 semester of printmaking. Students were evenly divided between urban and rural schools to capture differing experiences.

Data Collection Instruments

A semi-structured interview guide (see Appendix B) was developed based on the research questions, with open-ended questions addressing:

- For teachers: curriculum design, resource availability, training experiences, and perceived student outcomes.
- For students: engagement levels, challenges in practice, and suggestions for improvement.

The guide was piloted with 1 teacher and 2 students to refine clarity, with minor revisions to avoid leading questions (e.g., rephrasing “Do you think resources are insufficient?” to “What materials do you use for printmaking, and how do they affect your work?”).

Procedure

Ethical approval was obtained from City University Malaysia’s Research Ethics Committee (Ref: 2023-ART-012). All participants (and parents of student participants) provided written informed consent (see Appendix A). Interviews were conducted face-to-face between March and April 2023, lasted 30–45 minutes, and were audio-recorded with permission. Field notes were taken to document non-verbal cues (e.g., teachers’ frustration when describing resource shortages).

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to principles of voluntary participation, confidentiality, and anonymity. Participants were assigned codes (e.g., T1 for Teacher 1, S1 for Student 1) to protect identities, and all data were stored on password-protected drives. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without penalty.

Data Analysis

Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim, resulting in 85 pages of text. Thematic analysis was conducted in three stages (Braun & Clarke, 2006):

1. Familiarization: Researchers read transcripts repeatedly to identify initial patterns (e.g., “time constraints,” “cultural connection”).
2. Coding: Initial codes were grouped into broader themes (e.g., “resource disparities,” “teaching strategies”).
3. Validation: Two researchers independently coded 30% of transcripts; inter-coder reliability was 85%, with discrepancies resolved through discussion. Representative quotes were selected to illustrate key themes.

Trustworthiness of Data

Credibility was ensured through data triangulation (comparing teacher and student responses) and member checking (7 participants reviewed and confirmed interview summaries). An audit trail documented coding decisions, and representative quotes enhanced transparency. Transferability is supported by detailed descriptions of the research context, allowing readers to assess relevance to other regions.

Results and Discussion

RQ1: Practices and Resource Conditions

Analysis revealed that printmaking is primarily integrated into general art courses (45-minute sessions) rather than offered as a standalone subject, with significant variation in implementation across urban and rural schools.

Urban School Practices

Teachers in urban schools reported allocating 4–6 class sessions per semester to printmaking, covering basic techniques (linocut, monoprinting) and cultural context. For example, T2 (urban) described a unit: “We start with a video on Yangliuqing prints, then practice carving simple patterns on linoleum. By the end, students create a print inspired by traditional motifs.” These schools typically had dedicated art studios with tools (e.g., carving knives, ink rollers) and specialized paper. Some (e.g., T1’s school) collaborated with local museums, hosting student print exhibitions — an opportunity that enhanced student motivation: “My print was displayed in the city museum! Now I research more about traditional prints online,” noted S3 (urban).

Rural School Practices

In rural schools, printmaking was limited to 2–3 sessions per semester, focusing on simplified techniques due to resource constraints. Teachers relied on improvised materials: “We use foam sheets instead of linoleum — they’re cheaper and safer for students,” explained T6 (rural). Students often provided their own scissors or repurposed household items (e.g., bottle caps for inking). Despite this, rural students and teachers highlighted unexpected benefits: “We learn to be creative with what we have. Once, a student used a potato to carve a design — it looked great!” said T7 (rural).

Educational Value Across Contexts

Across both settings, teachers and students observed printmaking’s positive impact. Teachers noted improved concentration: “Carving requires focus — even restless students sit quietly

for 20 minutes,” said T3. Students emphasized creative problem-solving: “My first print was blurry, so I adjusted how hard I pressed the paper,” explained S5. These findings align with Wang and Liang’s (2016) research on printmaking’s role in skill development, while also highlighting its resilience as an educational tool despite resource limitations.

RQ2: Challenges and Recommendations

Participants identified three key challenges, with suggestions tailored to their contexts.

Limited Instructional Time

Both urban and rural participants noted that 2–6 sessions were insufficient for skill mastery. “We rush through basics — students rarely get to refine their work,” said T4. Students echoed this: “I wanted to fix my carving, but the next class was already about painting,” noted S8 (rural). This aligns with Qian’s (2022) observation that overcrowded art curricula leave little time for in-depth practice.

Recommendation: Expand printmaking to 8–10 sessions per semester, with a progressive structure (e.g., 2 sessions on history, 4 on basic techniques, 2 on creative projects). Teachers suggested blocking sessions (e.g., two 90-minute classes monthly) to allow uninterrupted practice.

Insufficient Teacher Training

Six of eight teachers reported self-taught printmaking skills, leading to avoidance of complex techniques. “I never learned woodcut — it’s too risky without training,” said T5. Rural teachers faced additional barriers: “We can’t afford workshops in the city,” noted T6. This reflects Zhao’s (2020) finding that rural art teachers have limited access to specialized training.

Recommendation: Develop district-led training programs, including:

- Workshops led by professional printmakers (suggested by 7/8 teachers), with online modules for rural teachers.
- Peer mentorship: Pair experienced printmaking teachers with novices (e.g., through school partnerships).

Resource Scarcity

Resource disparities were stark: urban schools averaged \$500/year for printmaking materials, while rural schools had budgets under \$100 (teacher estimates). Rural teachers often purchased supplies personally: “I spent \$30 last month on ink — that’s a week’s grocery money,” said T7.

Recommendation

- Secure government funding for basic materials (e.g., linoleum, ink) through local education bureaus.
- Establish partnerships: Urban schools could donate used tools to rural counterparts; local art colleges could run “material drives” (proposed by T1 and S2).

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study highlights printmaking’s unique value in junior high school art education under the new curriculum: it fosters cultural identity, creative thinking, and practical skills, while

adapting surprisingly well to resource constraints. However, its full potential is hindered by uneven resources, limited time, and inadequate teacher training — issues that undermine educational equity and the curriculum's core goals.

To address these, we propose four actionable steps:

1. Curriculum Adjustment: Allocate 8–10 progressive sessions to printmaking, with clear alignment to “core literacy” goals (e.g., linking cultural context to “cultural understanding,” iterative practice to “creative expression”).
2. Targeted Teacher Development: Implement district-led training with professional artists, including online resources for rural teachers. Mentorship programs can facilitate knowledge-sharing between experienced and novice educators.
3. Resource Equity: Advocate for government funding to standardize basic materials (e.g., carving tools, paper) across schools. Art institutions (museums, colleges) should partner with schools to supplement resources and host exhibitions.
4. Interdisciplinary Integration: Connect printmaking to other subjects — for example, collaborating with history teachers to create prints of historical events, or with literature teachers to illustrate poems — enhancing relevance and justifying extended class time.

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