

Teachers' Perceptions of AI in Mental Health Education: A Case Study in China's Vocational Colleges

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ABSTRACT

As artificial intelligence (AI) technologies increasingly enter educational practice, their role in emotionally sensitive domains such as mental health education remains underexplored. This study investigates how teachers in Chinese vocational colleges perceive the use of AI to support personalized instruction in mental health courses. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with three psychology instructors, the study identifies perceived benefits—such as improved instructional efficiency and responsiveness—as well as concerns regarding emotional detachment, ethical ambiguity, and reduced teacher-student interaction. Although the sample size is limited, the findings offer preliminary empirical evidence on teacher attitudes and highlight institutional, pedagogical, and ethical considerations necessary for responsible AI integration in vocational mental health education.

Keywords: *AI, Mental health education, Vocational education, Personalized learning.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is reshaping education through the deployment of adaptive learning platforms, emotion-sensing systems, and generative content tools, which offer new possibilities for personalization, efficiency, and engagement [1], [2]. However, the application of AI in emotionally sensitive domains such as mental health education remains underexplored—especially in vocational education settings, where student psychological needs are increasingly pronounced [3].

In recent years, mental health has emerged as a major concern in China's vocational colleges, driven by factors such as academic pressure, identity confusion, and employment uncertainty [4]. National policy responses—including the 2023–2025 Action Plan—have emphasized strengthening mental health curricula and campus counseling services [5]. Yet the incorporation of AI into these efforts is still minimal and fragmented. Pilot

projects have tested AI-based risk detection, facial emotion recognition, and chatbot-supported interventions [6][7], but questions remain regarding their ethical soundness, practical feasibility, and pedagogical alignment [8].

Teachers play a pivotal role in mediating AI adoption in classrooms. As frontline practitioners, they interpret, contextualize, and often constrain or enable how AI tools are used [9], [10]. Prior studies indicate that teacher acceptance of AI is influenced by trust, autonomy, effort expectancy, and perceived usefulness [9], [11], [12]. However, in mental health education—where emotional resonance, relational care, and ethical sensitivity are core elements—educators may be particularly cautious toward automation [10], [11]. Furthermore, empirical research on how Chinese vocational teachers specifically perceive and apply AI in this context remains scarce.

To address this gap, this study investigates how vocational college teachers in China understand, use, and critique AI-supported personalized

learning pathways in mental health education. It builds on recent reviews showing increasing but uneven adoption of AI in higher education and highlights the need for teacher-centered implementation frameworks [13].

Specifically, this research is guided by the following questions:

- RQ1: How do vocational college teachers perceive AI-supported personalized learning pathways in mental health education?
- RQ2: In what ways do teachers utilize AI tools to support personalization in their instructional practices?
- RQ3: What challenges and enabling conditions do teachers encounter when implementing AI-supported personalized learning in this context?

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows: Section II reviews related literature on AI integration and mental health education; Section III outlines the research methodology; Section IV presents the qualitative findings; Section V discusses theoretical and practical implications; and Section VI concludes with limitations and directions for future research.

2. RELATED WORK

AI is becoming increasingly embedded in educational settings, yet its role in supporting students' mental health—particularly from the teacher's perspective—remains underexplored. While emotion recognition systems and AI-driven early alert mechanisms demonstrate technical potential for identifying psychological distress [6], little is known about how frontline educators interpret, trust, and integrate these tools in emotionally sensitive classroom contexts.

2.1 AI in Mental Health Education

Existing research largely focuses on the technical performance of AI systems in psychological applications. Dalvi et al. [6] reviewed advancements in deep learning – based facial emotion recognition, reporting improvements in affective detection accuracy. However, implementation within instructional practice remains limited. Saeidnia et al. [7] and Tavory [8] argue that such systems often overlook human-centered design principles—such as emotional nuance, cultural relevance, and interpersonal

empathy—making them difficult to adapt for sensitive educational settings like mental health.

2.2 Teacher Trust and Adoption Mechanisms

Teacher trust is a critical determinant in AI adoption. Viberg et al. [12] found that teachers' trust in AI systems is shaped by perceived usefulness, ethical compatibility, and technological self-efficacy. Similarly, Zhang et al. [9] emphasized that autonomy, social influence, and effort expectancy predict AI acceptance among pre-service teachers. In emotion-sensitive domains, trust extends beyond functionality to encompass pedagogical alignment and ethical judgment, especially when student well-being is involved.

2.3 Ethical Tensions in Emotion-Sensitive Contexts

The use of AI in mental health instruction introduces ethical dilemmas around empathy, privacy, and depersonalization. Tavory [8] warns that algorithmic interventions risk undermining the relational foundations of emotional education, advocating for an “ethics of care” framework. Saeidnia et al. [7] further highlight the risk of cultural and emotional oversights when AI systems are deployed without contextual adaptation. These concerns are particularly salient in vocational education, where students may face compounded psychological stress due to social stigma and future uncertainty [4].

2.4 Institutional and Policy Context in China

In China, the Ministry of Education has strengthened its focus on student psychological support through the 2023–2025 Action Plan [5], calling for expanded counseling resources and curricular integration. Yet, the plan omits mention of AI or digital tools, reflecting a regulatory blind spot in the digitalization of mental health education. Ye et al. [3] argue that sustainable vocational education must incorporate psychological support mechanisms—but stress that such efforts are only viable if teachers are adequately trained and institutionally empowered.

2.5 Teacher Perspectives on AI in Emotion-Focused Education

Recent studies report mixed attitudes among educators toward AI in emotionally charged instruction. Delello et al. [10] found that while teachers appreciated AI's efficiency in administrative support, many expressed skepticism about its ability to replicate empathy and support student growth. Oh and Ahn [11] similarly point out the socio-emotional limitations of AI and propose a human-AI complementarity model that preserves the centrality of teacher-student relationships. However, little empirical research has examined these dynamics within China's vocational sector.

In summary, while the literature acknowledges AI's emerging potential in education, limited attention has been given to teachers' lived experiences in applying such tools to mental health instruction—particularly in vocational contexts. This study seeks to address that gap.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative case study design to examine how vocational college teachers in China perceive and utilize AI-supported personalized learning in the context of mental health education. A case study approach was suitable for investigating the complex interaction between technological innovation and classroom practice within real-world institutional settings [14]. In this research, the "case" refers to the instructional experiences of teachers responsible for the course Mental Health Education for College Students in Chinese higher vocational institutions.

3.1 Research Design

The study was theoretically informed by Fullan's three-phase model of educational change—initiation, implementation, and institutionalization—which provides a lens to interpret how AI tools are introduced, adopted, and routinized in pedagogical contexts [15]. This case-based design enabled a rich exploration of how educators interpret, adapt to, and shape digital reforms within the emotionally sensitive domain of mental health instruction.

3.2 Participants and Sampling

Three full-time female teachers were purposively selected from two public vocational

colleges located in southwest China. All participants were currently teaching the course Mental Health Education for College Students, primarily to students majoring in medical sciences, sports education, or public service. The teachers themselves held academic backgrounds in psychology. Selection criteria included:

- A minimum of three years' experience teaching mental health education;
- Basic familiarity with digital and educational technologies;
- Willingness to participate in a 30–60 minute semi-structured interview.

This small sample size aligns with qualitative research standards that emphasize information richness and contextual depth over statistical generalizability [14]. Participants were recruited via direct invitation and professional referral. Prior to data collection, all participants received detailed information about the study and signed written informed consent forms, affirming voluntary participation and confidentiality protections.

3.3 Interview Instrument and Data Collection

Data were primarily collected through semi-structured interviews. The interview protocol was designed based on three sources:

- Fullan's (2016) model of educational change [15];
- Existing literature on AI adoption in vocational and mental health education [3], [10];
- Observed digital practices and constraints in Chinese vocational institutions.

The interview guide comprised six thematic modules aligned with both the research questions and the theoretical framework:

- Professional background and teaching experience;
- Understanding of AI-supported personalized learning;
- Use of technology in Mental Health Education instruction;
- Challenges in implementation and institutional conditions;
- Teaching identity and future perspectives;
- Ethical considerations and pedagogical reflections.

The protocol was reviewed by peer researchers and piloted with one vocational teacher to improve clarity and contextual relevance. Interviews were conducted in Mandarin (either face-to-face or via Tencent Meeting), lasting between 40 and 60 minutes. All sessions were audio-recorded with permission and transcribed verbatim. Supplementary field notes were taken to capture contextual cues and non-verbal insights.

3.4 Data Analysis

Interview data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's six-phase thematic analysis framework [16]. Initial open coding was followed by axial coding to generate thematic categories, which were then mapped onto the research questions and Fullan's stages of change. A thematic coding matrix was constructed to trace linkages between interview prompts, coded responses, and thematic patterns.

To enhance analytical trustworthiness: Two researchers independently coded all transcripts and resolved discrepancies through discussion and consensus. Although inter-rater reliability was not statistically measured, iterative comparison ensured consistency. Member checking was conducted by returning transcripts to participants for review and factual validation. Reflexive memos were maintained throughout the process to mitigate researcher bias and maintain transparency.

Six final themes were identified: (1) Current use of AI tools; (2) Understanding of personalized learning; (3) Instructional integration of AI; (4) Barriers to adoption; (5) Institutional infrastructure and support; and (6) Teacher role transformation.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

This study followed established ethical standards for educational research involving human participants. Although the project did not require formal institutional review board (IRB) approval due to its non-interventional and minimal-risk nature, informed consent was obtained from all participants.

To ensure participant anonymity and confidentiality, pseudonyms were assigned, and all identifiable information was removed from transcripts and reports. Interview recordings and transcripts were securely stored on encrypted devices and are scheduled for deletion upon project completion.

Given the sensitivity of mental health education as a topic, the interview protocol was reviewed to minimize potential emotional distress. Participants were clearly informed of their right to withdraw at any point or skip any question without consequence. No student data or operational AI platforms were used in this study; all discussions remained conceptual, focusing exclusively on teachers' perceptions, experiences, and professional judgments regarding the role of AI in pedagogy.

4. FINDINGS

This section presents six thematic findings derived from semi-structured interviews with three teachers who currently teach Mental Health Education for College Students in Chinese vocational colleges. While sharing similar course contexts, the participants displayed diverse understandings, emotional orientations, and usage strategies concerning AI-supported personalized learning. The findings not only reaffirm insights from prior studies but also contribute localized perspectives to the under-researched area of AI in mental health education.

4.1 Divergent Familiarity and Usage Patterns of AI Tools

Consistent with Delello et al. [10] and Zhang et al. [9], participants exhibited varying degrees of AI familiarity, ranging from cautious experimentation to passive reliance on platform defaults.

Teacher 1 described actively using Wisdom Tree and AI-generated knowledge maps to enhance learning preparation: "Students complete pre-class learning through the Wisdom Tree platform, which includes videos and AI-supported knowledge maps." (Teacher 1)

In contrast, Teacher 3 admitted minimal engagement: "Honestly, I don't use AI tools much in class. I know they exist, but I think many teachers are still not familiar or comfortable with them." (Teacher 3)

Teacher 2 occupied an intermediate position, selectively adopting tools such as "Doubao" for pre-class material generation and engagement analytics: "I've used AI tools like 'Doubao' to prepare my teaching materials... Some platforms provide visual feedback on student engagement." (Teacher 2)

These patterns affirm that AI adoption in Chinese vocational colleges is often fragmented and preliminary, as noted by Chen et al. [2]. They also highlight that individual teacher agency significantly shapes implementation pathways—even within shared institutional constraints.

4.2 Personalized Learning as a Contested Concept

All three teachers endorsed the potential of AI to support personalized learning, but differed in how they conceptualized its application.

Teacher 2 envisioned AI as enabling instructional differentiation: “AI can identify different student levels for tiered instruction. That would be very helpful.” (Teacher 2)

Teacher 1 emphasized student autonomy through interactive maps: “The knowledge map shows what this course includes... Students can click on different parts depending on what they want to know.” (Teacher 1)

Conversely, Teacher 3 questioned whether students possessed the self-regulation needed for AI-driven personalization: “Some students don't even know what they need... I think we still need to guide them a lot.” (Teacher 3)

These perspectives reflect a core tension in the literature: whether AI augments or undermines teacher scaffolding in affectively charged domains. The findings partially validate Zhang et al. [9] and Oh & Ahn [11], who argue that perceived control and relational efficacy are central to teacher acceptance of AI-supported personalization.

4.3 Fragmented Implementation: Pre- and Post-Class Emphasis

In line with prior observations [1], [6], none of the teachers reported using AI tools in real-time instruction. Instead, AI applications were limited to pre-class planning or post-class review.

Teacher 2 used AI-supported word clouds for student keyword submission: “I ask a question, and students submit keywords. Then they appear on the screen...It gives a sense of consensus.” (Teacher 2)

Teacher 1 used engagement data to monitor but not dynamically respond: “Student video completion affects their grades...but I don't really intervene unless someone's score is too low.” (Teacher 1)

This limited integration reflects a broader pattern of infrastructural and pedagogical inertia, echoing the claims of Nguyen et al. [1] that technological potential alone does not guarantee embedded classroom transformation.

4.4 Institutional Conditions as Structural Barriers

All three teachers emphasized external constraints over personal resistance. These include limited training, unreliable infrastructure, and lack of financial support—factors frequently cited in the literature [3], [10].

Teacher 3 lamented: “Sometimes the Wi-Fi disconnects or multimedia fails—so even if we want to use AI, the environment is not stable enough.” (Teacher 3)

Teacher 2 mentioned subscription-based barriers: “AI tools often require subscriptions...Financial support from the institution would help.” (Teacher 2)

Teacher 1 highlighted both teacher and student unreadiness: “Teachers don't know how to use AI, and students are just addicted to their phones.” (Teacher 1)

These constraints echo Viberg et al. [12] in asserting that trust in AI is inseparable from institutional scaffolding. The findings expand this argument by adding that infrastructural gaps may erode both student engagement and teacher initiative.

4.5 Ethical Reservations and Emotional Boundaries

Teachers expressed deep concern about the socio-emotional limits of AI—particularly in contexts where empathy and authenticity are pedagogically central.

Teacher 3 was especially emphatic: “AI can't replace care. Students often perceive and value emotional authenticity in teachers—an aspect currently beyond the reach of AI systems.” (Teacher 3)

These reflections confirm Tavory's [8] and Saeidnia et al.'s [7] argument that AI systems—if not human-centered in design—risk depersonalizing emotionally intensive education. They also align with Oh & Ahn [11], who warn that

AI lacks the relational reciprocity crucial to emotional learning.

4.6 Conditional Optimism and Reimagined Teacher Roles

Despite these concerns, teachers showed cautious optimism about future AI integration, contingent on systemic reform.

Teacher 1 envisioned a shift in role identity: “In the future, teachers focus on mentorship, not knowledge delivery.” (Teacher 1)

Teacher 2 emphasized the importance of hybrid models: “AI is a tool but can’t replace professional judgment...phased integration is better.” (Teacher 2)

These insights extend Saeidnia et al.’s [7] conclusion that effective AI deployment must combine technical innovation with ethical and pedagogical recalibration.

5. DISCUSSION

This study explored how vocational college teachers in China perceive and engage with AI-supported personalized learning in the emotionally sensitive context of mental health education. Building on Fullan’s educational change framework [15], the discussion integrates empirical insights with conceptual and policy dimensions to interpret how localized institutional, pedagogical, and ethical realities mediate AI adoption.

5.1 Partial Realization of Personalization Through AI-Supported Practices

This study shows that while fully dynamic, real-time AI personalization remains limited in vocational mental health education, teachers have begun integrating AI features meaningfully into pre-class preparation and post-class review. These practices—such as using generative tools for material design or analyzing student engagement via platform data—demonstrate a pragmatic engagement with AI’s affordances, rather than mere idealistic endorsement.

Unlike assumptions that personalization remains aspirational, our findings suggest that vocational educators are already enacting partial forms of personalization within institutional constraints. This complements Dalvi et al.’s [6] optimism about AI’s early-stage contributions to cognitive scaffolding, while also extending Zhang

et al.’s [9] model by showing that trust and use are contextually modulated rather than uniformly high or low.

However, the limited presence of AI during live instruction aligns with Nguyen et al. [1], who noted that infrastructural and pedagogical inertia often confine AI to peripheral roles. This uneven adoption—active before and after class, passive during teaching—points to the need for deeper support in dynamic integration and teacher capacity-building.

5.2 Teacher Judgment as a Mediating Force

While AI systems offer structural efficiency and data-driven insights, the findings affirm that teacher professional judgment remains central in the pedagogical process—especially within emotionally sensitive domains such as mental health education. Participants’ selective engagement with AI tools reflected not only functional constraints but also deeper concerns about pedagogical authenticity, emotional nuance, and student trust.

This expands on Zhang et al.’s [9] UTAUT2-based findings by revealing that perceived usefulness is not purely operational: teachers weigh AI’s instructional value against their sense of moral and emotional responsibility. Oh and Ahn [11] describe this as a recognition of “socio-emotional deficiency” in AI—a concept vividly echoed in our participants’ reservations about fully outsourcing reflection, empathy, or moral reasoning to algorithms.

Furthermore, the divergent levels of emotional investment observed among the teachers suggest that judgment is not static but shaped by disciplinary background, personal teaching philosophy, and prior exposure to technology. One participant framed AI as an “assistant for content delivery,” while another viewed it as fundamentally incapable of replacing relational dialogue. These differences support Viberg et al.’s [12] emphasis on cultural and institutional variation in teacher trust formation, and highlight the importance of context-aware support systems in shaping AI acceptance trajectories.

5.3 Ethical Ambivalence and Pedagogical Boundaries

Teachers in this study expressed ambivalence toward the ethical dimensions of AI in mental health instruction, particularly when automation risks diluting human connection or encouraging emotional avoidance among students. While technological features such as emotion recognition or learning diagnostics are available, they were regarded as insufficient for fostering genuine interpersonal growth—an insight that moves beyond existing critiques by Tavory [8] and Saeidnia et al. [7] from conceptual to classroom-grounded evidence.

Crucially, the teachers' concerns extended beyond abstract ethical theory to include pragmatic dilemmas: How do you ensure student safety when AI flags emotional risk without offering relational support? How do students interpret AI feedback in affective domains, and do they trust it? These unresolved questions reinforce the call for human-centered AI design frameworks in education, particularly those attentive to emotional labor and reflective capacity.

Moreover, the tension between perceived benefits and emotional risks suggests that AI implementation is not just a technical matter, but a deeply pedagogical and ethical negotiation. As one teacher warned, "AI can't replace care." This statement, though concise, captures a broader unease shared across participants: that unchecked automation may undermine the relational foundation of mental health education.

5.4 Institutional Preconditions and Systemic Barriers

Despite individual willingness to explore AI's educational utility, all participants pointed to systemic limitations—ranging from technological infrastructure and platform fragmentation to professional development gaps and regulatory ambiguity. These barriers reflect a mismatch between macro-level policy signals and micro-level implementation realities.

Echoing Delello et al. [10], our findings emphasize that platform availability alone does not ensure pedagogical impact. While systems like Wisdom Tree or Doubao offer AI-infused features, their effective use requires targeted training, shared pedagogical frameworks, and financial or administrative support. The fact that teachers cited

"subscription costs" and "lack of guidance" as inhibitors suggests that technological equity is still unresolved in vocational education settings.

Moreover, although the Ministry of Education's Action Plan [5] highlights the growing importance of mental health education, it does not explicitly address the role of artificial intelligence or associated ethical frameworks. This omission creates a degree of regulatory ambiguity, leaving AI applications in mental health education without clear guidance or boundaries for responsible use. In this context, the institutionalization phase of Fullan's model [15] appears underdeveloped: tools exist, but systems to sustain, evaluate, and ethically govern them do not.

This study thus reinforces prior observations by Chen et al. [2] and Ye et al. [3] that cross-departmental coordination and ethical foresight are essential for sustainable innovation. Without them, AI in mental health education risks becoming another short-lived pilot rather than a transformative reform.

6. CONCLUSION

This study investigated how vocational college teachers in China perceive and implement AI-supported personalized learning within the context of mental health education. Drawing on Fullan's model of educational change and grounded in a qualitative case study design, the research provides empirical insight into how teachers mediate technological innovation in emotionally sensitive pedagogical domains.

Findings suggest that while AI is perceived as a promising tool for enhancing differentiated instruction and supporting pre- and post-class engagement, its classroom integration remains limited, fragmented, and shaped by contextual variables such as institutional infrastructure, professional capacity, and pedagogical beliefs. Teachers displayed cautious optimism, strategically employing AI features embedded in platforms like Wisdom Tree or Doubao, yet repeatedly emphasized that emotional care, ethical discretion, and relational depth remain beyond the reach of automation.

This study situates the integration of AI within the distinctive socio-educational context of China's vocational education system, characterized by uneven levels of digital literacy, fragmented technological platforms, and the absence of targeted

implementation guidelines or ethical frameworks specifically addressing AI in mental health instruction. These contextual factors introduce both uncertainties and opportunities, prompting teachers to develop adaptive strategies in their pedagogical practice. By foregrounding local dynamics, the study contributes a contextually grounded perspective to the global literature on educational technology and mental health education. It further demonstrates that teacher trust and ethical reasoning are not peripheral concerns but central determinants of AI's meaningful adoption in mental health education.

From a practical standpoint, the study highlights the urgent need for system-level alignment, including policy clarity, ongoing professional development, and robust ethical frameworks that empower teachers—not replace them—as co-designers of AI-enhanced instruction. Institutions must shift from mere tool implementation to fostering pedagogical ecosystems in which AI serves relational learning rather than undermining it.

Future research should broaden the empirical base by incorporating diverse institutional types, disciplines, and regional contexts. Including student voices will also be critical for assessing how AI is experienced at the learner level, particularly in affective domains. In addition, longitudinal studies could trace the evolving impacts—both intended and unintended—of AI on teaching practice, professional identity, and emotional engagement over time.

Ultimately, the responsible integration of AI into education—especially in domains where emotional intelligence and human connection are pedagogical priorities—demands more than technological sophistication. It calls for value-aligned innovation, where teacher agency, student well-being, and institutional readiness co-evolve with digital transformation.

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