

Development of a Suitable, Cultural, and Life-Oriented Kindergarten Curriculum

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Abstract: The technological revolution and the explosion of information have created a diverse world. More and more so-called advanced cultures are entering kindergartens, prompting us to think about how to correctly develop the existing local cultures in the cultural context, while simultaneously accepting and absorbing the appropriate parts of foreign cultures. It is also necessary to maintain a balance between diversity and localization to prevent kindergartens from becoming a “colony” of foreign cultures. The development of suitable, cultural, and life-oriented kindergarten curricula from different perspectives is the focus of such a balance. Only in this way can kindergartens truly fulfill their educational functions and provide a vibrant and colorful environment for children.

Keywords: Kindergarten curriculum; Suitability; Culture; Life-oriented

Online publication: January 18, 2024

1. Introduction

In the context of rapid technological progress and accelerating globalization, the development direction of the kindergarten curriculum needs to be further clarified. The most crucial issue is how to build a curriculum that can meet the needs of social development, cultivate talents with innovative thinking and cross-cultural communication skills, and balance the impact of globalization with the inheritance of local culture. The scientific and technological revolution and the explosion of information have created a diversified world. In such an environment, young children not only require a solid foundation of knowledge for their growth and development but also the ability to communicate across cultures on the basis of cultural identity.

“Culture is the root cause of the continuity of social life; it is also a key factor governing the multifaceted effects of globalization, rationalization, and economic change”^[1]. This means that the kindergarten curriculum should not only cover the transmission of knowledge but also serve as a bearer and transmission vehicle of cultural values. How to construct such a curriculum has become a question worth pondering. “Kindergartens not only reflect the culture in which they are located but are also an important place for cultural regeneration”^[2]. An in-depth understanding of the connotation of the kindergarten curriculum is the key to solving this problem, especially recognizing its important value in the transmission of knowledge and the carrying and dissemination

of cultural values. From this point of view, it is of great practical significance to explore how to construct a kindergarten curriculum that is suitable, cultural, and life-oriented according to actual needs.

2. Developmental of suitable kindergarten curricula

The cultural context provides a direction for the development of kindergarten curricula, which emphasizes the need to protect and promote the advantages of the cultural resources of the country, and at the same time match the needs of young children and the actual situation of the kindergarten. A culturally appropriate kindergarten curriculum not only provides, presents, and disseminates content that meets the cognitive developmental level, age, interests, and developmental needs of young children, but also strikes a dynamic, complementary, and balanced relationship with kindergarten software and hardware facilities.

2.1. Mutual suitability of the curriculum for the children

2.1.1. Consideration of individual differences

Individual differences refer to the characteristics of a child that are influenced by his or her own unique temperament, learning styles, and family environment. When designing kindergarten curricula, it is necessary to take into full consideration the characteristics and needs of children to ensure that they can acquire comprehensible knowledge and experiences that meet their individual developmental needs in their activities. Since the promulgation of the Guidelines for Kindergarten Development (for Trial Implementation), kindergarten curricula have endeavored to practice the principle of “respecting the rules of physical and mental development as well as learning characteristics of children, paying attention to individual differences, and promoting the individualized development of each child”^[3]. A kindergarten curriculum that takes into account the individual differences of young children reflects the suitability of the curriculum for the individual child. This kind of curriculum will not only respect the value of each child as an independent individual but also provide a good opportunity for children to discover their own highlights in their individualized development and to reach their personal zone of proximal development through the help of others. For example, regarding the knowledge of “snail’s living environment,” after learning about snails after the rain, the observation sheet shows that some children have mastered the appearance of snails, some have realized the living environment of snails, and some have understood the function of the mucus left by snails when crawling.

2.1.2. Meeting the age, interests, and cognitive developmental needs of children

Both Piaget’s and Vygotsky’s theories emphasize that education should be in line with children’s level of development. The essence of a kindergarten curriculum lies in the fact that children can personally perceive it with the support of teachers. Therefore, the kindergarten curriculum content should be personally participated and experienced by children, thus the age development characteristics, interests, and cognitive development needs of children need to be considered. At present, the development direction of many kindergarten programs has shifted from “teacher-led” to “child-led,” returning to using young children’s activities as the kindergarten curriculum. For example, the “King of Storytellers” game in kindergarten was initially designed to satisfy the interest of two young kids who like to tell stories. The interesting storyline and the small sense of achievement after telling the story attracted more children to join in. The activity not only satisfied the four-year-olds’ desire to express themselves and their interest in storytelling, but also promoted their language skills, listening skills, and ability to accept criticism. Paying attention to the children’s interests and needs in the organization of the curriculum and the development of the activities undoubtedly promotes the suitability of the curriculum for the children’s physical and mental development.

2.2. Suitability of the curriculum for the kindergarten environment

2.2.1. Concerns about kindergarten conditions

Kindergarten conditions are an important part of the kindergarten environment and have a significant impact on the development of the curriculum. The conditions of kindergarten operation mainly include the size of the kindergarten and the number of classes, the kindergarten building and the space, the facilities and equipment, the materials and books, the funding of the kindergarten, and so on. The 1985 and 2002 cases of Kunming's Dagan Kindergarten, researched by *Preschool in Three Cultures Revisited: China, Japan, and the United States* (hereinafter referred to as *Revisited*), vividly illustrate the changes in the curriculum under different conditions. 1985 Dagan Kindergarten was located in an old courtyard, with classrooms in a two-story brick building, and had a single and limited curriculum. In 2002, Dagan Kindergarten was upgraded to a five-story building with multi-media classrooms, toddler bedrooms, a gymnasium, a dance studio, a block playroom, and many other functional rooms. The curriculum and teaching methods were also updated. Such changes reflect the positive adjustments of Dagan Kindergarten's curriculum to the new environment under different operating conditions. If the 1985 Dagan Kindergarten did not have the appropriate hardware facilities, it would not have been able to carry out the 2002 curriculum; conversely, if the 2002 Dagan Kindergarten continued the same curriculum model as it did twenty years ago, it would have had a negative impact, both in terms of wasting existing resources and respecting the children, and would have been eliminated by the times in the end.

2.2.2. Upgrading of the faculty

If the conditions of kindergartens are regarded as hard facilities, then the level of teachers is a software necessity. When kindergarten hardware facilities are significantly renewed, the professional level of teachers will also be significantly improved. The two have an influence on each other and work together in the kindergarten environment. With the adjustment of kindergarten's access mechanism for teachers, more and more kindergarten teachers have specialized or undergraduate diplomas in preschool education. For those teachers with a lower level of education, they have also pursued further studies or changed jobs. This upgrading of the professionalization of the teaching force in parallel with the material conditions provides the basis for curriculum appropriateness. The level of professional development of the teaching force has a direct impact on the quality and effectiveness of curriculum implementation. Teachers' understanding of the concepts of "children's rights" and "respect for the child" has contributed to the transformation of curricular practices. For example, the block game in kindergarten has not only greatly enriched the play materials, but also shifted from aiming at improving intelligence to active learning, play-based, problem-solving, and the joyful construction of perceived success. In the process of children's independent building blocks, teachers no longer focus on the improvement of ability, but on the real practice of the curriculum concept of "respect for the child."

3. Development of a cultural kindergarten curriculum

"Culture is the shared experience of a society that is sustained by symbolically dependent systems and the memories of individuals"^[4]. Each individual cannot grow without the cultural soil in which he or she is rooted. For individuals, culture is not just a decorative ornament, but a practical and indispensable foundation for life. In the process of growing up, young children's learning and experience cannot be acquired without the influence of social culture and the inculcation of values. Therefore, on the premise of maintaining respect for local culture, kindergartens should base their curriculum development and design on local culture, harmonize with modern culture, and actively draw on foreign culture in order to maintain their cultural nature.

3.1. Utilizing the penetration of local culture in the curriculum

In 2018, when Chinese interviewer Jie Zhang asked Professor Tobin what advice he had for Chinese early childhood educators, Professor Tobin re-emphasized the central point of *Revisited*, “Value your culture, value your traditions, please continue to learn from other countries, but do not be in a hurry to borrow new ideas that you lose your valuable traditions, and the world has less diversity”^[5]. The local culture of each country and region has its own unique markers, which will permeate the kindergarten curriculum as well as every aspect of daily education in dribs and drabs. The report of the 20th Party Congress puts forward that it is necessary to adhere to the road of socialist cultural development with Chinese characteristics, enhance cultural self-confidence, and build a strong socialist cultural country. The kindergarten curriculum should make full use of local culture, which not only meets the needs of the times but also helps to develop children’s sense of identity and cultural self-confidence.

For example, some of the patriotic education carried out in kindergarten curricula, such as the “National Flag-Raising Ceremony,” “National Day,” and “Tribute to the People’s Liberation Army,” are in line with the promotion of the patriotism spirit during the period of our country’s socialist construction, and guide young children from an early age to build a sense of love for the motherland, the people, and the hometown. In addition, in the cultural background of our country, “labor is the most glorious” and “hard work makes you rich” have been advocated throughout the ages. The labor education carried out in kindergarten curriculum not only guides children to learn simple labor knowledge and skills, stimulates children’s love for labor and working people, and helps children develop good habits of love for labor, but also helps to form a social culture of love for labor and alleviate the reality that the spontaneous labor consciousness is disappearing. The reason local culture is developed from the kindergarten curriculum is that kindergartens are viewed as a place to continue and repair the value of local culture and restore cultural practice activities. Therefore, the kindergarten curriculum becomes a carrier of local culture and plays the role of infiltrating local cultural values into the curriculum.

3.2. Promoting traditional culture in the curriculum

Education in traditional culture is receiving increasing attention. Outstanding traditional Chinese culture “should be carried through all fields of enlightenment education, basic education, vocational education, higher education, and continuing education”^[6]. Kindergartens are an important link in the development of enlightenment education and are the main place to promote outstanding traditional culture^[6]. Traditional culture condenses the refinement and sublimation of life experience and contains rich cultural values and spiritual connotations. Kindergartens show the responsibility and possibility of promoting traditional culture^[7]. With the help of the kindergarten curriculum and the support of teachers, young children will recognize and learn about the outstanding traditional Chinese culture, enhance their national sentiment towards the Chinese nation, and establish firm moral values. Currently, many kindergarten teachers have already taken into account the knowledge acceptance level of young children in the design of the curriculum, and accordingly increased the proportion of the content of Chinese excellent traditional culture. The learning of traditional culture should be integrated into daily activities. Many kindergartens across the country have made traditional culture education a feature of their curriculum.

There are various forms of traditional culture appearing in the current kindergarten curriculum, and there are general contents about traditional culture, such as traditional festivals (Chinese New Year, Dragon Boat Festival, etc.), traditional arts (ink painting, tie-dyeing, Peking Opera, calligraphy, etc.), and traditional literature (ancient classics, talking books, etc.). Promoting outstanding traditional culture is not just narrowly focused

on adding explicit cultural activities to the kindergarten curriculum, but also focused on cultural penetration at different levels, such as our daily behaviors, polite expressions, filial piety, and so on. In addition, not only do young children need to be directly involved in the process of perceiving traditional culture, but teachers also need to play a guiding role, focus on teaching and learning with the characteristics of China's outstanding traditional culture, and broaden the understanding of the scope of traditional culture and the way to practice it^[7], including teaching by words and actions, setting an example, and honoring teachers and respecting their moral values, and so on.

3.3. Integration of local and foreign cultures

Under the background of globalization, the mutual integration of local and foreign cultures has become increasingly prominent. Modernization theory predicts that, globally, the ideologies of the most powerful cultural output country, such as educational concepts, will dominate the ideologies and cultures of other countries. This phenomenon can also be interpreted as a manifestation of social Darwinism, which states that over time, only the most rational and effective educational concepts and methods will be retained and disseminated, while those traditionally bound indigenous educational concepts may be replaced by more advanced foreign educational concepts. The relationship between local and foreign cultures is not one of mutual antagonism or replacement of local culture by foreign culture; there is no comparison between local and foreign cultures in terms of which is more important or which is better or worse, but rather the taking of the best from foreign cultures on the basis of full respect for local culture.

In the past few years, kindergartens in China used to over-promote and blindly follow the trend of carrying out all kinds of Western festivals in kindergartens while turning a deaf ear to local traditional festivals, resulting in the phenomenon of “invasion” of kindergartens by foreign cultures. However, in today's increasing trend of globalization and frequent cultural exchanges between countries and regions, the kindergarten curriculum that blindly develops foreign cultures has been greatly improved. The actual curriculum activities of kindergartens show that it is not the local culture that has been replaced by the so-called “the most reasonable” and “the most effective” foreign educational concepts, but rather a new type of local culture, which contains the essence of foreign cultures that are suitable for the development of the local community, has been formed in the context of a strong local culture in order to promote a more rational and coordinated development of the local community.

The Reggio philosophy has been widely used in the United States, but the American Reggio curriculum does not reproduce the original model, but rather removes “the smell of their culture”^[2], retaining and emphasizing only the artistic and aesthetic components that are consistent with the American culture, focusing on aesthetics as well as the process of recording children's thinking and learning. Although the Reggio educational philosophy is widely recognized and has accumulated a wealth of practical experience in the Emilia region of Italy, this does not mean that it is universal. For example, in the case of six kindergartens from China, the United States, and Japan, their kindergarten curricula have been searching for a harmonious blend of local and foreign cultures for ten years, and have not become increasingly homogenized. On the contrary, although there are some similarities in their basic practices and philosophies of early education, each of them maintains the uniqueness of its own culture^[2].

4. Development of a life-oriented kindergarten curriculum

The kindergarten curriculum that unfolds in a cultural context contains hidden cultural values that persist as society develops and the curriculum paradigm shifts. Under the influence of sociocultural contexts, the learning content that young children receive is closely linked to their actual lives, and this relationship has been evident

in early childhood education. During the matrilineal clan period, as the gender division of labor between men and women intensified, boys and girls above 8 years old began to be taught separate life skills. Girls were taught by women, while boys went out with men to learn hunting, climbing, and picking skills. Returning to the modern cultural context, kindergarten curricula are closely related to the daily lives of young children, from the objectives and activities to the content.

4.1. Connection between curriculum objectives and life practices

In designing curriculum objectives, it is necessary to take into account their relevance to the practice of life and the dynamic harmonization between predetermination and generation. The integration of kindergarten curriculum objectives with daily life does not mean that the curriculum is completely immersed in life and loses its original pedagogical structure. The return of education to life is not a return to primitive life. When formulating life-rich curriculum objectives, it is necessary to consider the scientific nature of the design of curriculum objectives and apply them flexibly according to the specific situation, as well as combining the local social and traditional culture.

The St. Timothy's Children's Center, a kindergarten from the United States featured in *Revisited*, serves as a good example. The kindergarten's curriculum is guided by the developmentally appropriate practice (DAP) philosophy advocated by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), and the goals of the curriculum are always based on "developmental and child-centeredness." NAEYC encourages the practice of "family-style eating" where children are allowed to take their own food. However, St. Timothy's does not apply this method because it does not align with the cultural traditions of local children's families. In addition, St. Timothy's actively responds to parents' expectations for their children to acquire more learning skills at an earlier age and tries to meet parents' needs based on the concept of developmentally appropriate practice. While this example may not be entirely consistent with the current "child-centered" curriculum philosophy in China, it does reveal a process of goal-setting that takes into account both the structural framework of the curriculum and the traditions of society and culture in a specific cultural context, which is closely related to the real lives of children.

Although the development philosophy of St. Timothy's Children's Center also emphasizes "development and child-centeredness," which is similar to China's goal-setting for life-oriented kindergarten curricula, Chinese kindergartens are now setting goals that are more consistent with the local cultural context. It reflects the educational goals and values of the kindergarten and realizes the developmental level that young children need to achieve at this age; at the same time, it also pays attention to the interests, experiences, and developmental needs of young children, and respects the subjective position of young children.

4.2. Integration of activity approach and life experience

The essence of the kindergarten curriculum is activity, which means that the curriculum must be realized through the subject's practical activities. Dewey's philosophy of education advocates "learning by doing," Xingzhi Tao believes that education requires "teaching and doing as one," and Heqin Chen advocates "teaching by doing, learning by doing, and seeking progress by doing." These ideas carry the implication of embodiment. Through complete and continuous direct perception, practical operation, and personal experience, young children's return to the living world is promoted. The intrinsic value of the kindergarten program lies in direct experience. The mode of activity influences the acquisition of direct experience. Life is the main place where direct experience is utilized and one of the main sources of providing direct experience.

Therefore, teachers and children can jointly consider and choose those scenarios that are closely related to

daily life when creating lessons and activities. The social role-playing games carried out in kindergartens are a good example of this. It helps young children to understand the meaning of social life. In this activity, all the scenarios originate from the inspiration and motivation of the children from the doll's house game, and they even create a complete mini-society. The teachers do not play a dominant role in the game, but rather join in as a participant to further enhance the children's problem-solving and verbal communication and expression skills through limited intervention. This approach to curriculum implementation, in which the activity approach is closely integrated with the realities of life, fits the notion advocated by Dewey in *The School and Society*: "Our schools become prototypes of social life, so that the active variety of trades reflects the real life of the larger society"^[8].

Furthermore, group activities are common in kindergarten programs. Although in the reform of preschool education, there is much discussion about "shifting from whole-class group activities to small-group or individualized activities." However, considering the Chinese cultural tradition, Chinese people are accustomed to living in groups, and group activities belong to a "modern system with Chinese characteristics, and group activities are appropriate and necessary in contemporary China"^[2]. In addition, group activities are common in kindergarten programs^[2]. In addition, the interaction and communication between children and their peers is an extremely valuable experience. Therefore, group activities continue to be a culturally appropriate way of adapting curriculum activities to the lives of young children.

4.3. Connection between course content and life scenarios

Young children's direct experience cannot be accumulated without their experiences in a specific space and time. Young children are faced with new problems, tasks, and opportunities at specific times and places. Choosing life-related curricular content means that the direct experiences that young children perceive in curricular activities are authentic and epitomize the reality of life that they are experiencing. This kind of curriculum content based on life situations is conducive to the construction of rich knowledge, the accumulation of experiences necessary for growth, and the learning of practical life skills in the interaction with familiar living environments. By organically integrating socially appropriate activities and the community, family, and human resources around children into the kindergarten curriculum, a comprehensive curriculum that originates from society, family, and kindergarten can be formed. Children perceive the content of the curriculum in fun-filled games, subconsciously learn about the world around them, and receive social and cultural influences.

For example, after watching the video of the social role-playing game at Sinanlu Kindergarten in *Revisited*, teachers from the United States and Japan expressed concern about the commercial elements of the game, such as the McDonald's restaurant, logos, and drink cups. However, the Sinanlu Kindergarten teachers explained that the McDonald's scene chosen by the children reflected the commercialization and modernization of the city of Shanghai in their eyes, as did the other scenes of hospitals, banks, and supermarkets. These different scenes and tools helped the children visualize the changing world they lived in. When the teacher joined the McDonald's game as a customer who had forgotten his wallet, the children were guided to think about ethics and morality through situational dialogues in a micro-social scenario teaching exercise. The children responded to the statement "I forgot my money" in a thoughtful way that enhanced their real-life experience of Shanghai. "The answer to this question is a preview of the skills, perspectives, and ideas that future citizens will need to navigate the new economy and society of Shanghai and China"^[2]. The program is designed to help children learn to live in Shanghai in the context of the new economy and society^[2]. The curriculum content deals with issues that young children really care about, and the actions that young children take with it will be real and meaningful. Such realistic curriculum content will bring young children the satisfaction that comes from solving problems.

5. Retrospect and prospect

Whether it is the conceptualization of the kindergarten curriculum, the development and construction of the curriculum, or the concrete practice of the curriculum, each aspect needs to be based on its own local cultural context, taking into account the value and role of culture in the development of the kindergarten curriculum. In particular, teachers, the direct implementers of the curriculum, need to develop a curriculum that is in line with the local culture and closely related to the modern daily life of the children according to the actual situation. Such a curriculum can only be enriched with the educational power of culture by balancing localization and diversification, and achieve the ultimate purpose of the curriculum, which is to promote the growth of young children. Only when kindergartens are deeply rooted in the local cultural context can they maintain their uniqueness in the multicultural flood, learn the excellent elements of other cultures that are suitable for local kindergarten education, and change the inappropriate parts of their own cultures, rather than becoming “cultural colonies.” Only in this way can the kindergarten really give full play to its educational function and provide a vibrant and colorful environment for children.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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