

Using Culture as a Foundation to Launch the Identity Voyage of Middle-Class Children: An Exploration of Strategies to Enhance the Cultural Identity of Kindergartens in Beijing

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Abstract

In this study, 60 middle-grade children in Kindergarten K in Beijing, China, were quantitatively assessed using the Cultural Identity Scale for Preschoolers (with good reliability and validity), and two teachers were interviewed in depth to construct an analytical framework of “experience-symbol-meaning.” The study analyses the three-dimensional dilemmas of cultural identity: the break between symbolic decoding and meaning association in the cognitive dimension, the game between local preference and Western attraction in the emotional dimension, and the break between family transmission and kindergarten education in the practical dimension. Based on the theory of embodied cognition, this study proposes a layered intervention strategy, aiming at cracking the problem of “formalization” and “fragmentation” of kindergarten cultural education, providing theoretical and practical references for cultural identity education in the preschool stage, and helping young children to build up the cognitive and emotional foundation of local culture. The aim is to solve the problem of “formalization” and “fragmentation” of cultural education in kindergartens, provide a theoretical and practical reference for cultural identity education in the preschool stage, and help young children to establish the cognitive and emotional foundation of local culture and to implement the goal of educating people with culture.

Keywords

Middle school children; cultural identity; kindergarten; cultural identity education; enhancement strategies.

1. Presentation of the Issue

At a time of accelerating globalization, the penetration of multiculturalism and Western thinking has had a significant impact on the initial construction of national and cultural identity in young children who are not yet mentally mature [1]. Educational values from different cultures may also affect children’s early cognitive development [2]. For this reason, cultivating cultural identity in early education is of great significance for the cultivation of an excellent national character and conscious patriotic sentiment [3,4].

In the Outline of the Plan for Building a Stronger Education State (2024-2035) issued by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the State Council, it is explicitly stated that preschool children’s education should be integrated into ideological and political education in an orderly manner by school segments, and that education in cultural self-confidence should be strengthened (Part II, Article (1)). Advanced socialist culture, revolutionary culture, and excellent traditional Chinese culture are integrated into all stages of education, from kindergarten to higher education, with an emphasis on the identification of cultural symbols and the experience of conventional festivals (Part II, Article (1)).

The Meaning Cultural Identity in Young Children refers to young children's recognition and sense of belonging to the cultural group to which they belong, which includes not only the knowledge and understanding of their own culture but also the incorporation of the cultural identity into their self-definition, and the experience of the emotions and meanings brought by that identity. Cultural identity education in kindergartens in the new era should highlight the mission of the times to embody socialist core values, the Chinese soul, and world sentiment [5]. Early childhood is a critical period of human development [6]. And, an essential stage for the initial formation of cognition, emotions and values. Middle-aged children, roughly 4-5 years old, are full of curiosity about the world and eager to explore and learn. Their thinking is beginning to transition from intuitive images to abstract logic, and they have a strong ability to perceive and accept the surrounding cultural environment. Cultural identity education during this period can help individuals better understand their own culture, establish a cognitive and emotional foundation for their local culture, and lay a solid groundwork for developing strong cultural self-confidence and national pride in the future. This can help them better understand their own culture and establish a cognitive and emotional foundation for their local culture, thus laying a solid foundation for developing a firm sense of cultural confidence and national pride in the future. From this, promoting children aged 3-6 to know, understand, obey, identify with, and love the excellent traditional Chinese culture and to develop behaviors and habits with Chinese cultural tendencies is the prerequisite for children to develop cultural self-confidence. It is also a critical mission for the implementation of the fundamental task of "cultivating morality and nurturing the human being"[7].

From a personal growth perspective, cultural identity can provide young children with a clear sense of self and a strong sense of belonging. It can enable young children to have a better understanding of their cultural roots and enhance their cultural self-confidence while allowing them to develop good behaviors in their daily lives. Familiarizing themselves with the language, customs, arts, and other cultural elements of their people, they will find the answers to "who am I" and "where do I come from" through cultural immersion, thus building up a clear perception of self. This kind of identity can provide strong psychological support to young children, making them more confident and calm in the face of a complex and changing world, and offer a strong guarantee for their psychological health and emotional development.

From the perspective of cultural transmission, young children are the future hope of cultural transmission. In the wave of globalization, various foreign cultures are constantly emerging, and local cultures are facing significant impacts and challenges. If cultural identity education is not strengthened in early childhood, the inheritance of local culture will face severe tests. Through education, young children can be exposed to, understand, and love the excellent traditional culture of their nation from childhood, sow the seeds of cultural identity in their hearts and minds, cultivate their perception of conventional culture and awareness of its inheritance [9] . and ensure that these valuable cultural heritages can be passed on from generation to generation, thereby perpetuating the nation's cultural heritage. Observations in Beijing Kindergarten K revealed a structural imbalance between the ability to decode figurative symbols and the ability to interpret symbolic meanings in the perception of local cultural symbols (e.g., mooncakes, dumplings.) among middle-aged children (4-5 years old). Specifically, children can accurately identify the physical characteristics of traditional festive objects (e.g., round shape, food form), but they have difficulty establishing symbolic links with the cultural core (reunion, commemoration of Qu Yuan.). When the teacher asked, "Why do we eat zongzi at the Dragon Boat Festival?" the typical response was, "Because zongzi are delicious and soft like ice cream." This suggests that children's understanding of cultural symbols remains at the level of sensory experience, failing to deconstruct the meaning of their historical origins and emotional value. This phenomenon falls short of the practice of "guiding young children to feel the richness and excellence of the motherland's culture" emphasized in the Learning and

Development Guidelines for Children Aged 3-6, and highlights the theoretical and practical tension of the “Opinions on the Implementation of the Project for the Inheritance and Development of Outstanding Traditional Chinese Cultures,” in which the cultural enlightenment demand of “educating young children” is in urgent need of implementation.

Further observation reveals that young children’s choice and preference of cultural symbols show a significant tendency to converge on Western culture, with a high frequency of discussion of foreign cultural symbols such as Disney cartoon characters, and a tendency for local cultural symbols to remain as commodity labels in the context of consumerism (e.g., “mooncakes are like biscuits”). This tendency of superficialization of cultural identity essentially reflects the compounded contradiction between the intergenerational family transmission break (e.g., lack of cultural enlightenment of grandparents), the tendency of symbolization in the kindergarten curriculum (e.g., substitution of manual activities for meaningful experience), and the alienation of media environment (intense penetration of commercial cartoons) in the construction of cultural identity of young children in the context of globalization.

This study takes the middle-class children of Beijing’s K-kindergarten as the research object. It aims to systematically analyze the three-dimensional dilemmas of middle-class children’s cultural identity through in-depth interviews: the rupture between symbolic decoding and meaning association in the cognitive dimension, the game between local preference and Western attraction in the emotional dimension, and the rupture between family transmission and kindergarten education in the practical dimension. Through the construction of the “experience-symbol-meaning” trinity analysis framework, we reveal the internal mechanism of the formation of young children’s cultural identity and then put forward a layered intervention strategy based on the theory of embodied cognition, which provides a theoretical basis and a practical paradigm for kindergartens to solve the dilemma of “formality” and “fragmentation” of cultural education and helps to realize “culture and people” as a human development goal in the stage of preschool education. The essence of educating people in preschool education is “to educate people with culture”.

2. Research Design

2.1. Research Objectives

This study was conducted on 4-5-year-old children in the middle class of Kindergarten K in Beijing, who are in the critical period of cognitive development from the pre-operational stage to the concrete-operational stage according to Piaget’s theory and whose thinking shows a gradual development from intuitive figurative thinking to abstract logical thinking, as well as a sensitivity to cultural perception and a preliminary ability to represent symbols (based on the “Guidelines for the Learning and Development of Children Aged 3-6 years old”). Cultural identity education at this stage can effectively promote children’s decoding of symbols and internalization of the meanings of their cultural systems and lay the foundation for their lifelong cultural cognition. Two middle-class teachers were randomly selected for the interviews.

2.2. Research methodology

This study employed purposive sampling to select two teachers (including one main classroom teacher and one supporting classroom teacher) from Kindergarten K in Beijing as the interview subjects, whose teaching experience ranged from 3 to 15 years (mean 8.2 years), ensuring that the sample included both novice and expert teacher perspectives. The “Interview Outline of the Implementation Path of Cultural Identity Education” was designed to focus on three core dimensions:

(1) Teaching strategy dimension: strategies for the figurative transformation of cultural symbols (e.g. gamification design of traditional festival activities);

- (2) Curriculum construction dimension: the logic of curriculum integration of local cultural elements (e.g., the path of integration of the festival curriculum with the five domains);
- (3) The dimension of practical difficulties: the obstacle of home and family cooperation in cultural identity education, the cognitive conflict of young children, and other fundamental challenges.

The interviews were semi-structured through open-ended questions (e.g., “How do you deal with young children’s cognitive bias towards traditional practices?”) and focused follow-up questions (e.g., “Can you give examples of ‘embodiment’ strategies in teaching cultural symbols?”) The interviews were combined with focused questions (for example, “Can you give examples of ‘embodiment’ strategies in teaching cultural symbols? The length of each interview was limited to 40-60 minutes, and nonverbal behaviors (e.g., pauses in expression and gestures) were recorded using dual-camera audio recordings as supplementary data for qualitative analysis.

3. Findings and Analyses

Through in-depth interviews and nonverbal behavioral coding analyses with two teachers of different teaching ages (Novice Teacher A, with three years of teaching experience, and Expert Teacher B, with 13 years of teaching experience), it was found that the two teachers showed strategic differences and experiential progression in their practice of cultural identity education, which was analyzed in terms of the three core dimensions of the presuppositions.

- (1) Teaching strategy dimension: intergenerational practice differences in the figurative transformation of cultural symbols

Novice Teacher A adopted a “sensory stimulation-led” transformational strategy, such as designing strong visual and tactile experience activities, including “mooncake mold topography” and “cinnamon lantern DIY,” for the Mid-Autumn Festival. However these activities lacked a clear interpretation of cultural meanings. When children analogize mooncakes to “dessert biscuits,” their processing stops at corrective feedback: “No, mooncakes are eaten at the Mid-Autumn Festival and should be shared with family members” (accompanied by gestures pointing to the moon picture). The nonverbal behavior showed that there was a 1.2-second gaze gap and gesture freeze when explaining the concept of “reunion,” reflecting the limitations of the ability to interpret cultural kernels.

Specialist Teacher B constructed an advanced strategy of “cognitive conflict - meaning reconstruction”: When dealing with children’s cognitive bias of “Father Christmas has more gifts,” she first triggered observation through a comparative situation of “opening a Christmas stocking box vs. opening a tiger shoe sent by grandma” (“What do you find different between the two gifts?”), then combined with family photos to tell the story that “Grandma makes the tiger shoes with one stitch, and there are blessings inside” (accompanied by a simulation of hand-stitching movements), and finally through a role-playing game for the children to “give traditional gifts” to the Muppets. The “body memory of cultural symbols” frequently appeared in the interviews (mentioned four times) and was accompanied by precise physical demonstrations when describing folkloric actions (e.g., demonstrating how to tie “auspicious knots” for tying colorful ropes at the Dragon Boat Festival), and Non-verbal behaviors echoed with the embodiment in the interpretation of meanings, which demonstrated the in-depth internalization of the theory of embodied cognition.

- (2) Dimension of curriculum construction: differentiation of domain integration paths for the incorporation of local cultural elements

Novice Teacher A’s festive season curriculum showed the characteristic of “single-point embedding”: in the spring equinox activity, the language domain taught singing the “Children’s Song for Spring Equinox”, and the art domain made kites, and the two sessions were

implemented independently and did not establish a link of cultural significance. The logic of her curriculum design was “to complete the cultural theme activities according to the textbook module”, and she confessed that “it was hard to think of the connection between the jump rope game and the Qingming Festival”, reflecting a cognitive fault line in the logic of integrating the five domains with the cultural core.

Expert Teacher B developed a “cultural gene decoding” mode of integration: taking “Winter Solstice” as an example, the science domain understood “day is the shortest and night is the longest” through the operation of the sundial model, the maths domain carried out coloring and counting in the “Nine-Nine Days of Cold Chart”, the social domain organized the “Dumpling Packing and Division of Labour Collaboration”, the language domain created the “Counting of Nine Songs”, and the health domain designed the “Stepping on Shadows to Avoid the Winter Solstice” outdoor game. The core strategy is to explore the multi-dimensional educational value of cultural symbols (e.g., “dumplings” is associated with food culture, labor education, mathematics, etc.), and to link the domains through a chain of questions (“How do we let every child have a dumpling? How many do I need to make? How to divide the labor the fastest?”). During the interviews, he repeatedly stressed that “culture is not a point of knowledge, it is a way of thinking that permeates life”, and proposed to carry out thematic activities on the twenty-four solar terms, reflecting the ability to construct from piecemeal activities to a systematic curriculum.

(3) The dilemma dimension of practice: a hierarchy of coping strategies to address barriers to home collaboration

Faced with the challenge that “parents think traditional cultural activities are not as important as English lessons”, novice teacher A adopts a passive response strategy: sending photos of cultural activities to the parents’ group with the additional description of “cultivating patriotic feelings”, but lacking a concrete plan for co-education between home and family, and mentioning that “some parents directly asked if they could cancel the handicraft class and replace it with picture book reading”, she appears to have a lowered voice and a backward, defensive stance.

Specialist Teacher B builds a “cultural capital transformation” intervention system.

Cognitive reconstruction: Designing “family culture treasure hunt” tasks (e.g., photographing “grandpa’s old objects” and “grandma’s specialty dishes”) to guide parents in discovering the life carriers of local culture.

Capacity building: A “Traditional Games Workshop” was organized, where parents were invited to learn the rule variations of hopscotch and flipping ropes, so that they could be transformed from “cultural bystanders” to “game facilitators.”

Conflict Transformation: When children ask, “Why are there no gifts for Chinese New Year?”, provide the “Guidebook for Comparing Chinese and Western Holiday Symbols” and instruct parents to use the question, “What do you love about the red envelopes you received and the Christmas gifts that you received in the same way?” Make meaningful connections. Non-verbal behaviors indicating home cooperation were accompanied by continuous nodding of approval and gesturing, showing a sense of efficacy in strategy implementation.

4. Exploring Strategies to Enhance the Cultural Identity of Young Children in Intermediate Schools

4.1. Developing thematic programs on traditional culture

Kindergartens can design thematic programs based on traditional festivals and folk tales to enrich children’s knowledge of cultural heritage. Take the Spring Festival as an example; the content of the curriculum encompasses the origin, legends, customs, and ways of celebration.

Through storytelling, we introduce the reasons for putting up spring couplets, setting off firecrackers and the meaning of exorcising evil spirits and praying for good luck, saying goodbye to the old and welcoming the new, and organizing activities such as making spring couplets, cutting window clippings, and wrapping dumplings so that children can feel the atmosphere of festivals and the charm of traditional culture through their experiences. Teachers explain the norms of writing spring couplets and their cultural connotations, then guide children to write simple spring couplets, such as “Fu” and “Chun,” to promote their recognition of traditional culture and appreciate for the unique flavor of Chinese characters and the depth of traditional culture in their writing.

4.2. Gamification of teaching and learning for fun

Integrating traditional culture through games that young children love can make them feel the charm of culture in a relaxing atmosphere. As an effective way of cultural transmission, teachers can select classic stories such as “Chang’e Runs to the Moon” and “Cowherd Weaving” and organize young children to play the roles of these stories, e.g., in “Chang’e Runs to the Moon”, young children can deduce the plot and play the roles of Chang’e, Houyi and Xiwangmu respectively through dialogues and movements. During the preparation stage, the teacher guides the children to understand the character traits and cultural background (e.g., Chang’e’s kindness, Hou Yi’s bravery) and then organizes a discussion on the truths and values embedded in the story (e.g., Hou Yi’s dedication to shooting at the sun, and Chang’e’s self-sacrifice in swallowing pills) after the performance is over. Through such discussions, children can deeply understand the cultural connotations of folktales, which can promote the cultural enlightenment of children’s minds, lead the development of children’s values, enhance the meaningful experience of children’s spiritual world, develop children’s cultural rationality and cultural beliefs [10]. And cultivate their moral concepts and value orientations.

4.3. Scenario creation and immersion learning

The kindergarten creates a “traditional market” scenario that simulates the ancient market scene and sets up different stalls for traditional food, handicrafts, and folk games. The conventional food stall displays traditional snacks, including sugar gourds, sugar figures, and dumplings. Parents or professionals demonstrate the process of making sugar gourds by removing the core of the hawthorn and wrapping it in sugar, allowing children to understand the cultural significance of traditional crafts and enhance their perception and understanding of local traditional culture, as well as experience the inheritance of this tradition in their daily lives. Handicraft stalls display paper cutting, embroidery, face painting, and other handicrafts. Children create simple works, such as colored paper patterns and clay face painting, with their own hands, and teachers introduce the history, characteristics, and cultural value of handicrafts during the production process to showcase the unique charm of folk art.

4.4. Strengthening home and family cooperation and forming educational synergy

Parents, as the first educators of young children, have a profound impact on their cultural education awareness and ability, so kindergartens can organize cultural lectures for parents and invite experts and scholars in the field of culture or senior educators to act as lecturers and addition to the lectures, regular cultural workshops for parents are held to provide a platform for practical exchanges. In the folk art workshop, folk artists are invited to teach traditional handicraft skills such as paper-cutting, embroidery and face-planting, Parents make handicrafts under the guidance of the artists to feel the charm of folk art and unique skills, for example, when making paper-cutting, the artist explains the folding and cutting skills and the symbols of the patterns, and the parents apply the skills they have learned to create paper-cutting works with their young children in the family cultural activities, to let them experience the fun of

traditional culture at the same time of enhancing the relationship between parents and children. Parents will apply the skills they have learned in family cultural activities to create paper-cutting works together with their children. Such practical activities help parents to integrate traditional etiquette into their daily lives, set an example for their children, and learn from each other through the sharing of cultural and educational experiences, thereby enhancing their cultural and educational competence jointly.

5. Summaries

In this study, we employed qualitative interviews to analyze the “experience-symbol-meaning” framework for the development of cultural identity among middle-class children in Kindergarten K in Beijing, and found that the children faced three challenges related to cultural identity. The study was conducted with 60 kindergarteners and two teachers, and it was found that there are three problems with the cultural identity of kindergarteners: at the cognitive level, they can identify the physical characteristics of traditional festivals, but it isn't easy for them to associate these characteristics with their cultural connotations. At the practical level, there is a disconnect between family and kindergarten education, and cultural education is fragmented due to the lack of cultural enlightenment of grandparents and the formalization of kindergarten curricula. Based on Embodied Cognition Theory, the study proposes intervention strategies, including the development of traditional cultural thematic curricula such as Chinese New Year and Dragon Boat Festival, game-based teaching such as role-playing Chang'e Runs to the Moon, creating immersive contexts such as simulations of traditional bazaars, and strengthening home and family cooperation through parental craft workshops. The study showed that children identified physical features, such as the round shape of mooncakes, but lacked cultural meaning, such as reunion. The tiered intervention strategy promoted the internalization of cultural meaning through embodied experiences, including writing spring couplets and making rice dumplings. The limitations of this study include the sample's limited scope, which only covers a single kindergarten in Beijing, and the lack of observations on children's behaviors and parents' perspectives, as well as a shortage of long-term evaluation data. In the future, the study can continue to explore the sample, deepen theoretical understanding, and integrate technology, thereby helping to build a more effective cultural identity cultivation system for young children.

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