

Brief Discussion on the Role of Teachers in the Integration of Folk Culture into Kindergarten Curriculum

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ABSTRACT

As folk culture serves as an effective resource for kindergarten curricula, it is crucial to emphasize the central role of teachers in this process. Teachers should be decision-makers, implementers, and researchers in curriculum development and implementation. In this context, teachers are required to possess the necessary professional and ethical qualities. To meet these requirements, it is essential to create a supportive environment for teachers' professional growth.

KEYWORDS

Folk culture; Kindergarten curriculum; Teacher role

With the arrival of industrial civilisation and the introduction of foreign cultures, traditional folk culture in our country has faced significant challenges. Many exquisite pieces of art and craftsmanship have gradually disappeared, leading to calls for the "salvation of folk culture." However, what people often understand by "salvation" is limited to the protection of tangible cultural assets and skills, neglecting the inner recognition of ethnic culture. To cultivate a sense of identification with one's own ethnic culture, it is essential to start with children. Early childhood education must play a crucial role in nurturing this ethnic identity. Kindergarten curricula should be tasked with the responsibility of transmitting ethnic culture and fostering children's recognition of it. Given its unique position in national culture, it is necessary to incorporate folk culture into the kindergarten curriculum framework. With the growing recognition among researchers and practitioners of folk culture as a valuable resource in kindergarten curricula, the role of teachers in this process has become increasingly evident. Teachers play a crucial role in the development and implementation of the curriculum, and without their effective involvement, any efforts in curriculum design would be in vain. Therefore, when folk culture is incorporated into kindergarten curricula, the core role of teachers must be acknowledged and emphasized.

1 Teachers as Decision-Makers, Implementers, and Researchers of the Curriculum

1.1 Teachers as Decision-Makers

In traditional roles, teachers are often seen as implementers of the curriculum, where the curriculum is predetermined by higher authorities and handed down to teachers, who then design specific activity objectives and steps based on textbooks and other reference materials. However, in the process of integrating folk culture into kindergarten curricula, teachers must shift away from this traditional role, moving from passive implementers to active decision-makers. This shift is primarily due to the nature of "integrating folk culture into the kindergarten curriculum." Since the emphasis is on "integration," there is no ready-made curriculum textbook for folk culture; teachers must rely on their own choices and judgments. Engaging in such activities is inherently part of broad-based kindergarten curriculum development, which refers to how kindergartens and teachers process and make decisions about the existing curriculum^[1]. Additionally, because folk culture is vast and profound, with significant regional differences, there is no universal folk culture curriculum that can be applied everywhere. Therefore, the integration of folk culture into the curriculum is primarily based on the kindergarten's own curriculum framework. In such a context, teachers have considerable autonomy and authority to select curriculum content with substantial educational value from the rich resources of folk culture, considering the specific needs of their kindergarten and class. They then organize, refine, and further design detailed activity plans. In this process, teachers transition from being mere implementers of the curriculum to decision-makers.

1.2 Teachers as Implementers of the Curriculum

While the role of the decision-maker involves designing the curriculum, the true realization of the curriculum's value depends on its implementation. Teachers are the primary executors of the curriculum. Implementation is the process of putting the curriculum design into action, and essentially, it is the creation of new educational experiences within a specific educational context^[2]. In this process, teachers need to "experience" the curriculum content, presenting it to children in ways they can understand and engage with. For young children, tangible and engaging folk culture is

particularly attractive. Therefore, teachers must pay close attention to creating an appropriate environment and providing necessary resources and materials. Kindergarten curricula are divided into explicit and implicit courses, where the creation of an environment falls under the implicit curriculum. This environment subtly influences children, making it important to establish a setting that allows them to be immersed in the charm of folk arts. Consideration can be given to both the overall kindergarten environment and the internal environments of various activity rooms. There are numerous spaces within the kindergarten grounds that can be effectively utilised. For instance, one kindergarten has created playful relief sculptures of the twelve zodiac animals on either side of the entrance, enabling children and parents to appreciate the allure of traditional culture every day. Corridors should also be a focal point; beautiful embroideries, along with children's dyeing and paper-cutting works, can be displayed on the walls. Inside the activity rooms, a designated area can be set up for thematic activities, featuring a thematic wall decoration along with a specific exhibition space for showcasing children's handcrafted art. Various handicrafts can also serve as indoor decorations. Additionally, a dedicated exhibition room for folk arts can be established to display a collection of folk crafts with significant artistic value, allowing both children and parents to appreciate these works. In folk paper-cutting activities, teachers use pictures, videos, and stories—various media suitable for children—to give them an initial sensory understanding of folk paper-cutting, then provide materials like scissors and paper to allow the children to engage in hands-on activities. Similarly, in folk ceramics activities, pictures, physical objects, clay, and paint are used to support the environment and materials, as well as the children's involvement in hands-on tasks. The developmental characteristics of young children dictate that their understanding and experiences of things must be mediated through various visual materials, requiring ample interaction with the environment and materials. Therefore, teachers, in the implementation process, play more of a role as creators of the environment, providers of materials, and initiators of activities.

1.3 Teachers as Researchers of the Curriculum

In action research, although teachers participate in decision-making, design, and implementation of the curriculum, I feel that they have not yet fully made the shift from "teachers" to "researchers." The integration of folk culture into the kindergarten curriculum is still in an experimental stage and lacks a fully developed system to follow. As such, in this experimental process, teachers need to transition from their traditional role as "teachers" to that of "researchers." I believe that fostering reflective awareness and enhancing reflective abilities are key to achieving this shift. In action research, while I tried to encourage teachers to engage in more reflection through teaching reflections, interviews, and private discussions, most teachers provided fragmented thoughts at the experiential level, lacking deeper insights and reflections. The reasons for this phenomenon are varied, such as a lack of understanding of research issues, heavy daily workload, weak research awareness, and insufficient theoretical grounding. However, if teachers fail to make this shift, they will not be able to identify existing problems in time or make necessary adjustments during subsequent stages. This will result in a failure to ensure the scientific and rational nature of the curriculum at each stage—from decision-making to implementation and evaluation—thus hindering the educational value of folk culture from being fully realized within the curriculum. Therefore, it is clear that teachers are crucial in the process of integrating folk culture into kindergarten curricula. Only when teachers embrace the role of "researchers" can the true integration of folk culture and the kindergarten curriculum be guaranteed.

Typically, people categorise craft courses under the domain of arts, leading to the assumption that folk crafts naturally belong in this field. However, I believe that folk crafts should permeate activities across all areas in kindergarten. Only by being represented in various domains can the educational value of folk crafts be fully realised; it should not be limited solely to the arts. For instance, using handmade crafts by children as props in physical activities or recognising various geometric shapes through the drawing of different folk patterns. Kindergarten curricula, by nature, are integrated and multi-faceted, with various fields overlapping. Folk crafts encompass educational content from all domains, and when approached with educational insight, they represent an inexhaustible treasure. It is important to note that incorporating folk crafts into kindergarten curricula does not mean simply establishing a separate folk craft class. Rather, it involves seamlessly integrating them into the comprehensive activities of the kindergarten's curriculum.

2 Requirements for Teachers' Competence in "Integrating Folk Culture into Kindergarten Curriculum"

The integration of folk culture into kindergarten curricula requires teachers to be able to select age-appropriate content from the vast array of folk cultural traditions and incorporate it into the curriculum, guiding young children to interact and communicate with folk culture in ways that are suitable for their developmental stage. This is a complex process, which places new demands on teachers' competencies. Based on surveys, interviews with frontline kindergarten teachers, and insights gained from action research, the author categorizes the competencies required for teachers into two aspects: professional competence and ethical competence.

2.1 Professional Competence

Firstly, teachers should possess a certain level of knowledge and understanding of folk culture. In the action research process, due to a lack of knowledge about folk culture, teachers often find themselves in the awkward situation of "learning on the spot" and facing difficulties when teaching. For example, teachers might mistakenly identify a donkey in a paper-cutting as a pig, fail to accurately describe the "bride" image in Ku Shulan's paper cuts, or confuse the history of pottery development with that of Yunnan's purple pottery. It is often said that teachers must have a "bucket of water" to give students a "cup of water." Currently, the knowledge reserve and cultural literacy of kindergarten teachers regarding folk culture are very weak. The integration of folk culture into the kindergarten curriculum requires teachers to enhance their learning in this area. For folk crafts, this means familiarizing themselves with the development history, cultural value, material sources, and production methods of major folk crafts. Secondly, and perhaps most crucially, teachers need to have the professional sensitivity and ability to integrate folk culture into the kindergarten curriculum. Professional sensitivity refers to a teacher's ability, based on a certain level of cultural literacy and a deep understanding of children's characteristics, to discern the most valuable aspects of folk culture for children's development and to identify points of integration with the curriculum. The ability to explore and organise folk culture, as well as to select and integrate it, is essential. The resources that teachers initially collect may still be rough, and some content may not be suitable for inclusion in kindergarten curricula. Thus, it is necessary to filter and creatively adapt these resources. When selecting materials, the "educational" aspect should be the foremost consideration. This is dictated by the intrinsic value of the kindergarten curriculum. For instance, folk dough sculptures like dough fish and dough tigers express people's pursuit of truth, goodness, and beauty in the simplest and most fundamental forms, which can resonate emotionally with children and purify their hearts. Meanwhile, folk paper-cutting themes such as "The Mouse Marries" showcase clever concepts and unique imagination, stimulating children's thinking and providing them with space for creativity. Additionally, traditional tie-dye provides children with opportunities for hands-on engagement and to recreate their own artistic works. It is crucial to thoroughly extract and reflect the educational elements embedded in various forms of folk crafts within the curriculum.

However, due to the limitations of specific eras, many folk crafts also contain elements of feudal superstition, such as the folk paper-cut "Clearing the Sky", which carries certain magical connotations. Such elements should be excluded from kindergarten curricula. Furthermore, it is important to adapt the content to align with the physical and mental characteristics of children. This involves making creative modifications to ensure that the complexity and aesthetic appeal are suitable for young learners. For instance, traditional folk paper-cutting techniques often involve intricate methods requiring fine lines to represent fur on animals, which may pose challenges for young children still developing their fine motor skills. Therefore, the focus should be on grasping the overall shapes and main features instead.

There are three main ways to incorporate folk crafts into the kindergarten curriculum: organizing dedicated folk craft activities, expanding upon the existing curriculum, and organically integrating folk crafts into the curriculum. All of these approaches require teachers to possess such professional sensitivity. Furthermore, teachers must have the ability to design, implement, and evaluate curricula. Designing a curriculum requires teachers to accurately understand the educational value of the selected folk culture and develop goals and activity plans that reflect this value, in line with the children's actual needs. Implementing the curriculum requires teachers to provide an appropriate environment and materials for the children, offering guidance in a way that makes use of various media such as physical objects, pictures, body language, verbal communication, and facial expressions, thereby making the content "experiential" and encouraging children's active participation. Curriculum evaluation requires teachers to reflect on the activities in a timely manner, observe the children's behavior at all stages, and assess the effectiveness of the activities using comprehensive and scientific standards.

2.2 Ethical Competence

Ethical competence refers to a teacher's sense of responsibility, enthusiasm for work, and moral integrity. To some extent, ethical competence is even more important than professional competence. Teachers with strong professional skills but a lack of enthusiasm cannot truly perform their roles effectively. Integrating folk culture into the kindergarten curriculum requires teachers not only to have a strong sense of responsibility for children's development (which, as the author believes, is something that many kindergarten teachers do not lack), but also to have a broader social vision that extends beyond the walls of the kindergarten, fostering a strong sense of social responsibility. Folk culture is an important part of our traditional culture, and integrating it into the educational system is a vital means of preserving and passing on folk culture, as well as fostering students' sense of national identity and cultural pride. Teachers must recognize this and their own social value, so they can dedicate themselves to their work with the greatest enthusiasm. An important goal of integrating folk culture into the kindergarten curriculum is to guide children to appreciate and identify with the excellent folk culture of China. To achieve this, teachers themselves must also "beautify their own appreciation," truly loving and

admiring China's outstanding folk culture.

3 Creating a Supportive Environment for Teacher Development

3.1 Creating a positive and enterprising professional growth atmosphere

From the above analysis, it is clear that being able to effectively integrate folk culture into the kindergarten curriculum is no simple task. In reality, it is almost impossible to find teachers who meet all these requirements. Therefore, it is important to view teachers with a developmental perspective, offering them opportunities for growth and recognizing their potential. Consequently, it is crucial to foster a supportive environment that promotes teacher growth and encourages a mindset of continuous development. Given that pre-service training rarely covers folk culture content and teachers seldom organize folk culture activities in their daily work, it is inevitable that they will have limited knowledge and experience in this area. Teachers should recognize their own shortcomings and actively seek to enhance their understanding of folk culture through various methods, such as online resources, television programs, and field trips, especially focusing on the unique local cultures. For instance, in the two kindergartens in Honghe Prefecture, Yunnan Province, that participated in the author's research, there are rich folk cultural resources, such as the customs, clothing, architecture, songs and dances of the Hani and Yi ethnic groups, as well as local crafts like Kunchuan purple pottery and Gejiu tin products. Kindergartens should create an environment that encourages collaboration, communication, and discussion among teachers. This can include organizing specialized training sessions, inviting experts and folk artists to offer training, and leveraging community and parent resources to arrange field trips and visits. In a democratic and relaxed atmosphere, teachers can jointly discuss activity plans, exchange experiences, and engage in self-evaluations and peer evaluations. This will help to create a conducive environment for teachers' growth and development.

3.2 Establishing incentive mechanisms to guide kindergarten teachers to actively enhance their competencies

Firstly, the incentive mechanism should be designed and implemented from both internal and external aspects. Internal incentives mainly manifest in teachers' self-development and professional satisfaction, stimulating their enthusiasm for work. External incentives involve salary, promotion and other welfare policies. Kindergartens should establish a fair and reasonable salary system, not only focusing on the increase of basic salary, but also providing differentiated rewards based on teachers' professional abilities, work performance and educational contributions. Furthermore, the transparency of the teacher promotion mechanism can effectively motivate teachers to strive for self-improvement. For instance, a multi-level promotion and merit evaluation system can be established based on teachers' performance in teaching achievements, research projects, and social services, etc., so that outstanding teachers can receive due recognition and rewards, thereby stimulating the enthusiasm of the entire teaching staff for conducting course research and design. Finally, kindergartens should also attach importance to the support and participation of parents and society. They should encourage parents to provide feedback and opinions on teachers' work, thus creating a favorable atmosphere for home-kindergarten co-education. Through multi-faceted incentive mechanisms, kindergarten teachers can be helped to continuously improve their own professional qualities and enhance their abilities in education and teaching, thereby laying a solid foundation for children's healthy growth and all-round development. All in all, a sound incentive mechanism can not only boost the motivation for teachers' professional growth, but also effectively promote the improvement of the overall educational quality of kindergartens, and finally achieve harmonious and win-win results among families, schools and society.

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