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Integrating Local Cultural Resources Into Preschool Curriculum: An Empirical Study of Four Kindergartens in Lushan County, China

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ABSTRACT

Local cultural resources play a crucial role in enriching early childhood curricula and fostering children's cultural identity; however, their integration into kindergarten-based curriculum practices remains inconsistent and underdeveloped in many regions. This study examines the current status of local culture integration in the curricula of four kindergartens in Lushan County, Sichuan Province. Using a mixed-methods approach, data were collected through questionnaires (n = 93), semi-structured interviews with teachers and administrators (n = 12), and analysis of curriculum documents. Results reveal that although teachers generally value the importance of local culture, their understanding is often superficial, with notable differences between local and non-local teachers. Curriculum content selection is predominantly limited to visible and easily accessible cultural elements such as festivals and folk activities, while deeper cultural resources—including regional crafts, local narratives, and intangible heritage—are insufficiently explored. Implementation practices tend to be event-driven, fragmented, and lacking continuity, with limited integration across learning domains. Major barriers identified include insufficient cultural knowledge, lack of professional training, inadequate teaching resources, time constraints, and limited community and policy support. The findings suggest that systematic teacher training, richer resource development, strengthened home–community partnerships, and improved curriculum planning frameworks are needed to advance culturally grounded early childhood education. This study contributes empirical evidence to support culturally responsive curriculum development in China and offers practical implications for regional policy and preschool practice.

KEY WORDS: local cultural resources; kindergarten curriculum; teacher cognition; culturally responsive pedagogy; early childhood education; China

1. Introduction

Local culture has increasingly become a critical component of early childhood curriculum development, as educators and policymakers

worldwide recognize its role in supporting children's identity formation, cultural continuity, and meaningful engagement with

their communities. Research has shown that when curricula incorporate cultural knowledge that is rooted in children's lived environments, learning becomes more relevant, coherent, and socially grounded (Bishop, 2007; McCarty, 2003). In the Chinese context, national policy documents such as the Guidelines for Kindergarten Education (Trial) and the Guidelines for the Learning and Development of Children Aged 3–6 emphasize the need for kindergartens to draw on local cultural resources in designing experiences that support children's holistic development and emerging cultural awareness. These policy directions echo broader theoretical perspectives, including sociocultural theory, which situates children's learning within culturally mediated contexts (Vygotsky, 1978; Rogoff, 2003).

Despite these policy expectations, the integration of local cultural resources into everyday kindergarten curricula remains limited in practice. Existing empirical studies suggest that many kindergartens focus primarily on easily recognizable or festival-related cultural elements while overlooking deeper cultural narratives, intangible heritage, and community knowledge systems that hold significant educational value (Li & Chen, 2018; Wang, 2017). As a result, curriculum implementation is often superficial, fragmented, and disconnected from the broader cultural ecology of the region. These challenges reflect a broader pattern noted in both Chinese and international research: teachers often lack the cultural knowledge, pedagogical skills, and institutional support required to translate local culture into developmentally appropriate and meaningful learning opportunities (Athanasios et al., 2015; Gay, 2010).

Lushan County provides a particularly meaningful context for examining these issues. The region possesses rich local cultural resources—including traditional festivals, folk customs, crafts, and community-based cultural practices—yet there has been little systematic investigation into how these resources are understood, selected, and enacted within kindergarten curricula. While some studies have explored local culture in early childhood education in China, most are theoretical, fragmented, or based on single-case analyses, leaving a gap in comprehensive, region-level empirical research (Zhang & Zhang, 2021). Moreover, few studies examine multiple dimensions of curriculum development simultaneously, such as teacher cognition, curriculum content selection, instructional implementation, and organizational structures.

To address these gaps, the present study investigates the current status of local cultural resource integration in the kindergarten-based curricula of four preschools in Lushan County. Through a mixed-methods approach combining surveys, interviews, and curriculum document analysis, the study examines how teachers perceive local culture, how they select and transform cultural content, and what obstacles they encounter in implementing culturally grounded curriculum practices. The study also explores the structural and institutional factors that shape curriculum decision-making, thereby providing a more holistic understanding of the mechanisms influencing cultural curriculum development.

By illuminating teachers' practices, challenges, and contextual realities, this study contributes to broader discussions of culturally responsive and culturally sustaining pedagogy in early childhood education (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Although local cultural resources possess considerable potential to enrich kindergarten curricula and foster children's cultural identity, their integration in practice remains limited and uneven. Persistent gaps exist between policy expectations and classroom implementation, particularly as many teachers lack the cultural knowledge, pedagogical strategies, and institutional support necessary to

transform cultural resources into meaningful learning experiences. By examining four kindergartens in Lushan County, this research provides empirically grounded insights into how local culture is interpreted, selected, and enacted within curriculum practices. These findings not only offer practical implications for curriculum design, teacher professional development, and policy support in county-level preschool systems, but also establish a foundation for deeper inquiry into the challenges, mechanisms, and possibilities involved in constructing culturally grounded early childhood curricula that honor community heritage and strengthen school–community relationships.

2. Methods and Materials

This study adopted a mixed-methods research design to develop a comprehensive and contextually grounded understanding of how local cultural resources are integrated into kindergarten curricula in Lushan County. Mixed-methods approaches are especially valuable in early childhood research because they allow for the simultaneous examination of broad patterns and in-depth interpretations, thereby producing a richer and more nuanced understanding of complex educational phenomena (Creswell, 2014). By combining quantitative and qualitative methods, the present study sought to capture both teachers' general tendencies and the underlying meanings that shape their curriculum practices.

Lushan County was selected as the research site because of its distinctive cultural landscape, which includes traditional festivals, folk crafts, local narratives, and community-based cultural practices. These cultural features provide a rich foundation for curriculum development, yet anecdotal evidence suggests that they remain underutilized in local kindergartens. The four participating kindergartens—three public and one private—represent the diversity of institutional types within the region and were chosen through purposive sampling to ensure variation in school size, teacher backgrounds, and resource availability.

A total of 93 valid questionnaires were collected from teachers across the four kindergartens. The questionnaire consisted of four major sections: (1) teachers' demographic information, (2) their understanding of local cultural resources, (3) curriculum implementation practices, and (4) perceived challenges in integrating cultural content. The instrument was developed based on existing studies of culturally responsive pedagogy and early childhood curriculum design (Li & Chen, 2018; Wang, 2017; Gay, 2010). To ensure clarity and appropriateness, the questionnaire was piloted with six teachers in a non-participating kindergarten, and minor revisions were made to improve item wording and response accuracy. Descriptive statistical analysis was conducted using SPSS to identify distributions, frequencies, and dominant patterns in teachers' responses.

To deepen the analysis beyond the numerical trends, semi-structured interviews were conducted with four principals and eight teachers. These participants were selected based on their teaching experience, involvement in curriculum development, and willingness to articulate professional perspectives. Semi-structured interviewing allows for flexible yet targeted inquiry, enabling researchers to uncover teachers' tacit beliefs, personal experiences, and situated challenges (Rogoff, 2003). The interview protocol included open-ended questions focusing on teachers' approaches to identifying cultural resources, the pedagogical strategies they employ, the institutional supports available, and their perceived gaps in knowledge and skills. Interviews were audio-recorded with consent, transcribed verbatim, and coded through an iterative thematic

analysis process (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Coding reliability was strengthened by having two researchers independently code portions of the transcripts and compare interpretations until consensus was reached.

In addition to surveys and interviews, the study incorporated curriculum document analysis to examine how local cultural elements were represented in formal instructional planning. Documents collected included annual curriculum plans, thematic units, lesson plans, school-based curriculum handbooks, and records of cultural activity implementation. Document analysis is widely used in curriculum research as it allows researchers to trace how teachers interpret policy, make decisions about content selection, and translate cultural values into pedagogical structures (Zhang & Zhang, 2021). These documents served as a crucial source of triangulation by cross-checking discrepancies between teachers' self-reported practices and the actual curriculum materials produced by their institutions.

To enhance methodological rigor, the study employed several validity strategies, including data triangulation across three sources, regular memo-writing during analysis, and member-checking with three interviewed teachers to confirm the accuracy of interpretations. Ethical considerations were fully addressed: all participating schools granted institutional approval, and all teachers provided informed consent after being briefed about the study's purpose, procedures, and confidentiality measures. Participants were assured that data would be anonymized and used solely for research purposes.

By integrating survey data, interview narratives, and curriculum documents, the methodological design allowed for a multi-layered understanding of how local cultural resources are currently applied—and underutilized—in kindergarten curricula. This comprehensive approach provides a solid empirical foundation for interpreting the study's findings and for proposing actionable recommendations to support culturally grounded curriculum development in early childhood education.

3. Results and Findings

The comprehensive analysis of survey data, interview transcripts, and curriculum documents revealed four interrelated findings concerning the integration of local cultural resources into preschool curricula in Lushan County. These findings provide insights not only into teachers' current knowledge and practices but also into the structural and pedagogical mechanisms influencing curriculum development.

3.1 Teachers' Understanding of Local Cultural Resources

Teachers' Levels of Cultural Understanding

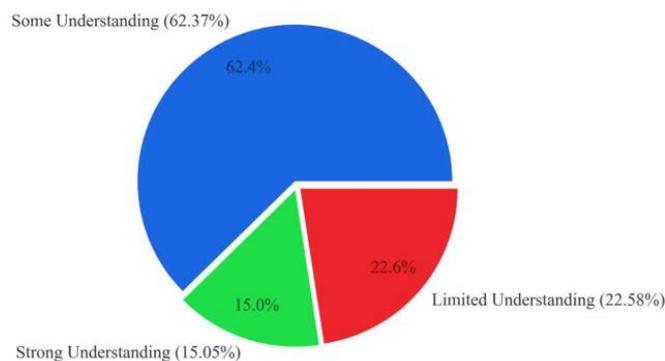


Figure 1. Teachers' Levels of Cultural Understanding.

The survey results revealed considerable variation in teachers' understanding of local cultural resources. As illustrated in Figure 1,

the majority of teachers (62.37%) reported having "some understanding" of local culture, while only a small proportion (15.05%) indicated that they were "very familiar" with local cultural resources. Meanwhile, 22.58% of respondents acknowledged limited understanding. This distribution demonstrates that, although local culture is generally recognized as relevant to early childhood education, comprehensive and systematic cultural knowledge is not widespread among teachers.

Further analysis of demographic data showed differences related to teachers' backgrounds. Local teachers constituted 76.34% of the sample, whereas 23.66% were non-local teachers. Interview data suggested that non-local teachers were more likely to rely on fragmented information or informal learning channels, such as conversations with colleagues or community members, when learning about local culture. These teachers frequently expressed uncertainty regarding the accuracy of their cultural knowledge and hesitancy in incorporating local culture into classroom activities.

Across both groups, teachers reported that their understanding of local culture was primarily derived from personal life experiences rather than from formal professional training or structured learning opportunities. Documentary analysis of training records further confirmed that systematic instruction on local cultural knowledge was largely absent from existing professional development programs.

Taken together, the results presented in Figure 1 indicate that teachers' understanding of local cultural resources is uneven, experience-based, and insufficiently supported by formal professional learning mechanisms.

3.2 Selection of Local Cultural Content in Kindergarten Curriculum

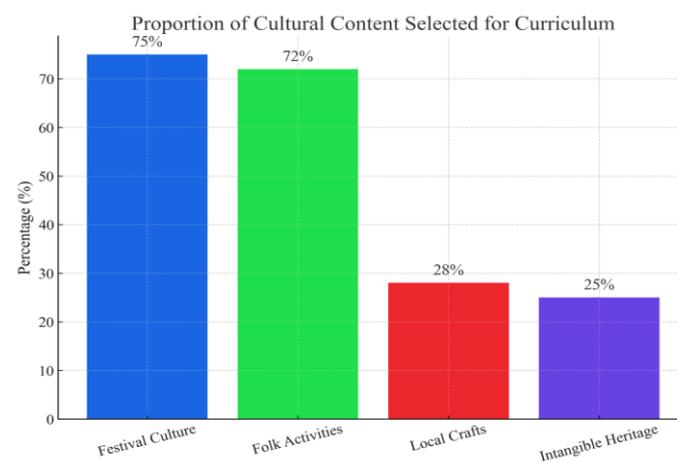


Figure 2. Proportion of cultural content selected for curriculum development.

Analysis of curriculum content selection revealed a strong preference for explicit and easily implementable forms of local culture. As shown in Figure 2, cultural festivals, traditional arts, and folk customs were the most frequently selected cultural elements in kindergarten curricula. Teachers reported that these types of content were visually engaging, supported by readily available materials, and easily adaptable to existing activity formats.

By contrast, less visible cultural resources—such as traditional craftsmanship, agricultural practices, local production processes, and forms of intangible cultural heritage—were incorporated far less frequently. Interview data indicated that teachers often perceived these cultural elements as abstract or difficult to translate into developmentally appropriate classroom activities. In some cases,

teachers expressed concerns about their own limited understanding of such content, which further reduced the likelihood of its inclusion in curriculum planning.

Curriculum documents reviewed for this study showed a similar pattern. Weekly and monthly teaching plans frequently listed festival-related activities, while references to deeper cultural practices or locally specific knowledge were rare. When such content did appear, it was often presented briefly and without explicit learning objectives.

Overall, Figure 2 illustrates a selective pattern of cultural content integration in which observable and operationally convenient cultural elements dominate curriculum design, while deeper cultural resources remain underrepresented.

3.3 Implementation Approaches for Local Cultural Curriculum

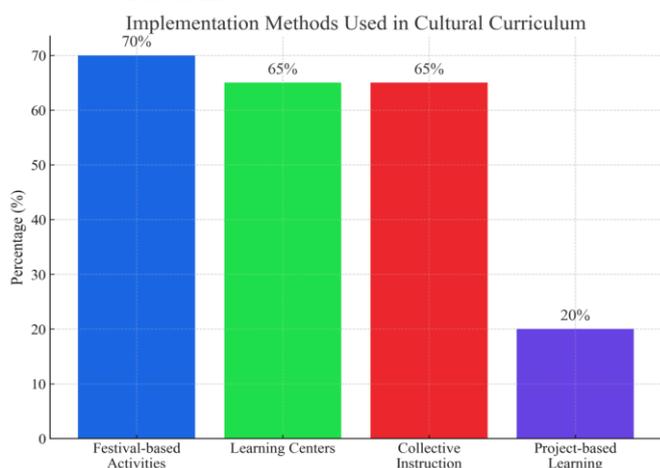


Figure 3. Implementation methods used in cultural curriculum.

With respect to curriculum implementation, teachers primarily employed thematic activities and daily-life-based teaching approaches to introduce local cultural resources. As presented in Figure 3, festival-themed activities, collective teaching sessions, regional games, and routine classroom activities were the most commonly used implementation methods. These approaches emphasized children’s direct participation and sensory engagement with cultural content.

However, more sustained and integrative instructional strategies—such as environment-based curriculum design, extended regional learning areas, and project-based learning—were used far less frequently. Interview data revealed that cultural activities were often planned as isolated teaching events rather than as components of longer instructional sequences. Teachers also reported constraints related to time, workload, and curriculum schedules, which limited opportunities for extended cultural exploration.

Classroom observation records further indicated that cultural activities tended to focus on task completion and activity procedures, with limited follow-up or reflection activities designed to deepen children’s understanding. As a result, cultural learning experiences were often brief and discontinuous.

Taken together, the data displayed in Figure 3 suggest that the implementation of local cultural curriculum was predominantly episodic and lacked continuity across instructional activities.

3.4 Organization of Local Culture Across Curriculum Domains

Cross-Domain Integration of Local Culture

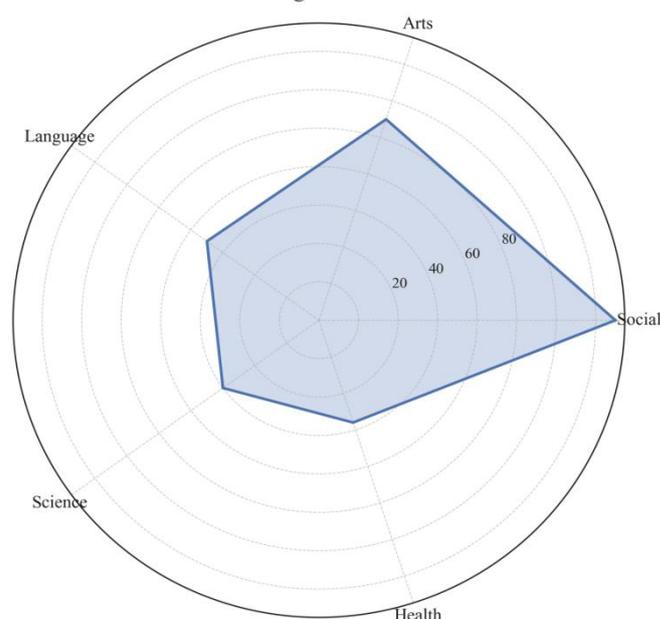


Figure 4. Cross-domain integration of local culture.

Analysis of curriculum organization revealed clear differences in the extent to which local cultural resources were integrated across curriculum domains. As shown in Figure 4, the integration of local culture was most prominent in the social and arts domains, followed by comparatively lower levels of integration in the language, science, and health domains.

Specifically, more than half of the teachers reported frequent incorporation of local cultural elements within the social domain, particularly in activities related to social customs, community life, and moral education. The arts domain also demonstrated a relatively high level of integration, with local culture commonly embedded in music, dance, visual arts, and handicraft activities. In contrast, fewer teachers reported integrating local cultural resources into language education, and integration within science and health education was reported least frequently.

Survey data further indicated that while local culture was often used as contextual material in social and arts activities, its integration in other domains tended to be incidental rather than systematic. For example, in the language domain, cultural elements were primarily used as background topics for storytelling or vocabulary learning, whereas explicit learning objectives related to local culture were rarely identified. In the science and health domains, local cultural resources were largely absent from curriculum planning, with only a small proportion of teachers reporting occasional integration.

Document analysis of weekly and monthly teaching plans supported these findings. Cultural activities were predominantly clustered within specific thematic units in the social and arts domains, while references to local culture in science, language, and health activities were sporadic and uneven. In addition, Figure 4 illustrates notable variation in the overall balance of cultural integration across domains, suggesting that local culture was not consistently positioned as a cross-domain curricular resource.

Taken together, the results presented in Figure 4 indicate that the organization of local cultural resources across curriculum domains was uneven, with a concentration in socially and artistically oriented areas and limited integration in subject-oriented domains.

3.5 Perceived Barriers to Integrating Local Cultural Resources

Teachers reported multiple barriers that constrained the integration of local cultural resources into kindergarten curricula. As shown in Figure 5, the most frequently reported challenges included insufficient professional training (72%), limited cultural knowledge (68%), time constraints (61%), inadequate teaching resources (55%), insufficient policy support (50%), and limited collaboration with families and community organizations (47%).

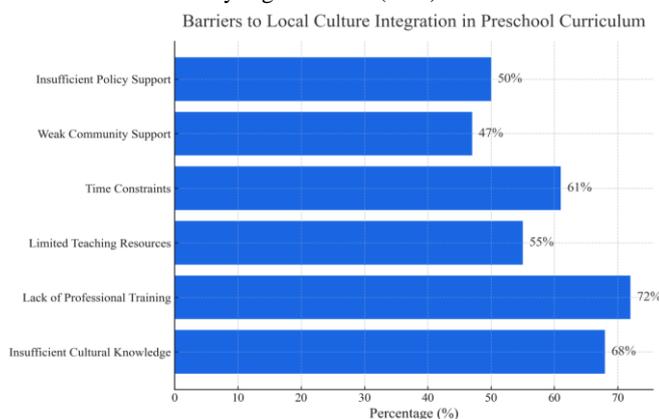


Figure 5. Barriers to the integration of local cultural resources in preschool curriculum.

Interview data suggested that these barriers were closely interconnected. Teachers who reported limited training opportunities also tended to report lower confidence in curriculum design, while those lacking institutional support described difficulties accessing external cultural resources. Time constraints were frequently mentioned in relation to competing curriculum demands and administrative responsibilities.

Document analysis further indicated that few formal mechanisms existed to support sustained collaboration between kindergartens and local cultural institutions. In most cases, cultural activities relied on teachers' individual initiative rather than institutional coordination.

Taken together, the results presented in Figure 5 demonstrate that barriers to local cultural integration operate at both individual and systemic levels, shaping curriculum practices in interconnected ways.

3.6 Summary of Results

Overall, the results presented in this section reveal consistent patterns in how local cultural resources are currently understood, selected, implemented, and organized within kindergarten-based curricula in Lushan County. Across survey data, interview accounts, curriculum documents, and visualized figures (Figures 1–5), teachers demonstrated generally positive attitudes toward local culture but limited depth of cultural understanding. Cultural integration practices were characterized by selective content choices favoring visible and easily implementable cultural elements, episodic implementation approaches, and uneven distribution across curriculum domains. In addition, multiple interrelated barriers at both individual and institutional levels were identified, constraining the sustained and systematic integration of local cultural resources. Collectively, these findings provide an empirical foundation for the subsequent discussion by outlining the current state and structural features of local culture integration in preschool curriculum practice.

4. Discussion

This study offers a nuanced understanding of how local cultural resources are integrated into kindergarten-based curricula in Lushan

County by examining the interactions among teachers' cultural knowledge, curricular decision-making, instructional practices, and institutional support structures. Rather than viewing the observed challenges as isolated teaching issues, the findings point to a set of interconnected mechanisms operating at individual, curricular, and systemic levels that shape the enactment of culturally responsive pedagogy in early childhood education.

4.1 From Surface-Level Inclusion to Mechanism-Based Interpretation

The analysis indicates that the integration of local cultural resources in the participating kindergartens remains largely surface-level and event-oriented. Teachers tended to incorporate highly visible and socially recognizable cultural elements, such as traditional festivals and folk arts, while less tangible cultural dimensions—including local histories, values, and community narratives—were rarely addressed in sustained ways. This pattern cannot be adequately explained by individual teaching preferences alone. Instead, it reflects the interaction between teachers' limited cultural knowledge, their perceptions of pedagogical risk, and prevailing institutional expectations.

Insufficient familiarity with local culture constrained teachers' confidence in transforming cultural resources into developmentally appropriate learning experiences. Faced with uncertainty about cultural accuracy and instructional effectiveness, teachers gravitated toward cultural content that was familiar, easily observable, and publicly validated. In this context, the preference for symbolic or festival-based activities functioned as a form of risk management aimed at avoiding cultural misrepresentation and instructional uncertainty. This mechanism helps explain why local culture, despite being widely acknowledged as educationally valuable, is often reduced to fragmented representations rather than embedded as a sustained curricular foundation.

4.2 Fragmentation as a Curriculum Design Challenge

A further concern emerging from the findings is the uneven integration of local cultural resources across curriculum domains. Cultural content was predominantly situated within the social and arts domains, while its presence in language, science, and health education remained limited. Although such imbalance is frequently attributed to teachers' insufficient curricular competence, a deeper examination suggests that it is closely linked to challenges in curriculum design and conceptual translation.

Transforming local culture into domain-specific learning objectives requires teachers to engage in abstract curricular thinking. This process involves identifying conceptual connections between culture and subject knowledge, aligning cultural content with developmental goals, and designing coherent learning progressions over time. In the absence of systematic curriculum frameworks and targeted professional guidance, teachers often struggle to move beyond surface-level integration. Consequently, local culture is treated as supplementary content rather than as an organizing principle for curriculum planning. From a curriculum theory perspective, this fragmented approach undermines curriculum coherence and limits opportunities for cumulative cultural learning, thereby restricting children's ability to develop sustained and meaningful cultural understanding.

4.3 Institutional and Contextual Constraints on Curriculum Innovation

The findings further suggest that the challenges associated with integrating local culture cannot be fully addressed without considering broader institutional and contextual constraints.

Teachers reported limited access to professional development opportunities specifically focused on the pedagogical transformation of local cultural resources. Existing training programs tended to emphasize general teaching skills while providing little guidance on how to translate local culture into coherent curriculum structures and classroom practices.

In addition, the lack of sustained collaboration among kindergartens, families, and local cultural institutions further constrained curriculum innovation. Although community members and cultural practitioners represent valuable sources of cultural knowledge, their involvement in curriculum planning and implementation remained sporadic and informal. This separation positioned kindergartens as the primary—and often sole—agents responsible for cultural transmission, thereby limiting both the authenticity and depth of children’s cultural learning experiences. These findings underscore the importance of conceptualizing local culture integration as a systemic endeavor that requires coordinated support across policy, professional development, and community engagement, rather than as an isolated instructional practice.

4.4 Implications for Culturally Grounded Curriculum Development

Taken together, the findings clarify how teachers’ cultural knowledge, pedagogical beliefs, and institutional conditions interact to shape curriculum implementation in early childhood settings. They suggest that professional development initiatives must move beyond general cultural awareness and instead provide practical pedagogical models that support teachers in transforming local cultural resources into developmentally appropriate and domain-integrated learning experiences. Moreover, sustained cultural curriculum integration depends on the availability of structured curriculum frameworks, institutional support mechanisms, and meaningful partnerships with families and community cultural organizations. Addressing these interconnected factors is essential for advancing culturally grounded curriculum development in county-level preschool systems.

5. Conclusion

This study examined how local cultural resources are interpreted, selected, and enacted within kindergarten-based curricula in four kindergartens in Lushan County. By integrating survey data, interviews, and curriculum document analysis, the research provides an empirically grounded account of current practices and challenges in culturally grounded curriculum development at the county level. The findings demonstrate that while teachers generally recognize the educational value of local culture, its curricular integration remains fragmented, superficial, and uneven across learning domains.

The primary contribution of this study lies in revealing the underlying mechanisms that shape teachers’ curriculum decisions. Rather than attributing limitations solely to individual teacher competence, the study highlights how limited cultural knowledge, insufficient professional support, and a lack of systematic curriculum frameworks jointly constrain the depth of cultural integration. This perspective shifts the focus from individual deficits to structural and contextual conditions, offering a more nuanced understanding of why local cultural resources are often reduced to event-based or symbolic representations in kindergarten curricula.

From a theoretical standpoint, the study contributes to discussions on culturally responsive and culturally sustaining pedagogy by illustrating how curriculum coherence and developmental continuity are essential for meaningful cultural learning in early childhood education. The findings suggest that local culture should not be

treated as supplementary content but as a generative foundation for curriculum design that supports children’s long-term cultural understanding and identity formation.

In terms of practice, the study underscores the importance of targeted professional development that supports teachers in transforming local cultural knowledge into developmentally appropriate and domain-integrated learning experiences. It also highlights the need for stronger collaboration between kindergartens, families, and community cultural institutions to enhance the authenticity and sustainability of cultural curricula. At the policy level, the findings point to the necessity of providing structured guidance, resource platforms, and institutional support for culturally grounded curriculum innovation in county-level preschool systems.

Several limitations of this study should be acknowledged. The research was conducted in a limited number of kindergartens within a single county, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, the study focused primarily on teachers’ perspectives, leaving children’s learning experiences and outcomes for future investigation. Future research could expand the sample scope, incorporate longitudinal designs, and explore children’s engagement with local culture across different curriculum domains.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that local cultural resources hold significant potential for enriching kindergarten-based curricula, but realizing this potential requires systematic curriculum planning, sustained professional support, and coordinated community engagement. By situating local culture within a coherent and developmentally grounded curriculum framework, early childhood education can more effectively honor community heritage while supporting children’s holistic development.

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