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A Dialogue Between Children's Literature and Place-Based Education: Curriculum Development in Taiwanese Preschools

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ABSTRACT: Place-based education emphasizes reconnecting schooling with local contexts by grounding learning in the communities and natural environments where students live. Through this educational approach, learning becomes more authentic, meaningful, and culturally relevant, while fostering students' sense of place and strengthening their connections with their local communities and environments. Within this framework, children's literature serves as an important pedagogical medium that connects young children with the culture, history, and natural environment of the places in which they live. Rather than merely transmitting cultural knowledge, children's literature encourages children to actively explore and interpret local stories, cultural traditions, and lived experiences. Through this process, children develop cultural identity, cultivate a sense of belonging to their communities, and enhance their awareness of cultural preservation and sustainable local development. Therefore, children's literature can be regarded as an important bridge linking cultural sustainability and early childhood education. Through literary learning experiences that introduce young children to local history, cultural heritage, community stories, and traditional cultural practices, teachers can cultivate children's respect for cultural diversity while fostering their sense of community engagement, civic participation, and social responsibility. In doing so, children's literature not only contributes to the preservation and transmission of local culture but also promotes sustainable community development. From this perspective, children's literature fulfills an important role in cultural transmission while advancing the core principles of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), particularly with regard to cultural sustainability, social inclusion, and community well-being. This pedagogical approach also aligns closely with the core principles of Taiwan's Early Childhood Education and Care Curriculum Framework, which emphasize holistic child development, social participation, cultural appreciation, and respect for life. Through meaningful literary learning experiences, young children develop language competence, empathy, imagination, critical thinking, and intercultural understanding. These competencies are increasingly recognized as essential capacities for future citizens to address the challenges of globalization, cultural diversity, and sustainable development. Accordingly, integrating children's literature into place-based education not only deepens young children's understanding of and identification with local culture but also cultivates their capacity to care for their communities, respect cultural diversity, and contribute to sustainable development. In this sense, children's literature demonstrates significant educational value in promoting cultural sustainability and fostering the competencies required of future citizens.

KEYWORDS: children’s literature, place-based education, young children

1. INTRODUCTION

Building more peaceful, just, and sustainable societies begins with education. Education not only profoundly influences every aspect of people's daily lives and their future prospects, but is also shaped by factors such as health and the natural environment. In the face of escalating global challenges—including climate change, democratic backsliding, persistent social inequalities, and the increasing prevalence of discrimination, hate speech, violence, and conflict—education serves as a powerful means of addressing and preventing these problems. When thoughtfully designed and effectively implemented, education not only contributes to responding to these global challenges but also provides a valuable means of fostering students' understanding of their local communities and cultural heritage. Through such educational experiences, students can develop a stronger sense of place identity, cultivate an appreciation for the places in which they live and grow, and become more committed to caring for their local communities. Children’s literature serves not only as an important medium for young children’s language development and literary appreciation but also as a valuable educational resource for fostering their understanding of local communities and cultural heritage. Through stories grounded in local contexts, children can establish meaningful connections between their everyday experiences and the histories, traditions, values, and ways of life of their communities. Such literary experiences foster the development of cultural identity, strengthen a sense of community belonging, and cultivate an appreciation of cultural diversity. Furthermore, by engaging with locally meaningful narratives, children develop greater respect for cultural differences and a deeper understanding of their social environments. These experiences also encourage empathy, social responsibility, and intercultural competence, thereby preparing children to participate as informed, culturally responsive, and globally minded citizens. In this way, children's literature contributes to the broader educational goal of preparing learners to function effectively as citizens in an

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increasingly interconnected world (Banks, 2015; Bishop, 1990; Chen & Shih, 2025; Gay, 2018; Nikolajeva, 2014; Short, 2009; Sipe, 2007; UNESCO, 2026; Wang & Shih, 2022, 2023). This study further underscores the educational value of integrating children's literature into place-based learning. Rather than treating local culture as static knowledge to be memorized, children's literature enables young children to actively engage in the understanding and construction of cultural knowledge through imagination, dialogue, observation, and everyday lived experiences. This learning process reflects a constructivist perspective, which posits that children actively construct knowledge through meaningful interactions with cultural contexts and their social environments. From this perspective, local culture is not merely instructional content but also an authentic and meaningful educational resource that effectively connects classroom learning with community life. Moreover, integrating children's literature with local cultural education contributes to the realization of the core principles of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD). Sustainability is concerned not only with environmental protection but also with the preservation of cultural heritage, social inclusion, and community well-being. By guiding young children to explore local history, traditional crafts, and community stories, teachers can cultivate respect for cultural heritage while encouraging children to become active participants in the sustainable development of their communities. In this sense, children's literature serves as an important bridge linking cultural sustainability and early childhood education. This pedagogical approach also aligns closely with the core principles of Taiwan's Early Childhood Education and Care Curriculum Framework, which emphasize holistic child development, social participation, cultural appreciation, and respect for life. Through meaningful literary learning experiences, young children can develop language competence, empathy, imagination, critical thinking, and intercultural understanding. These competencies are increasingly recognized as essential for future citizens to navigate the challenges posed by globalization and culturally diverse societies (Ministry of Education, 2017; Shih, 2022, 2024d; Piaget, 1952; Vygotsky, 1978). Although previous studies have separately examined children's literature, place-based education, and Education for Sustainable Development, relatively little attention has been paid to the theoretical relationship between children's literature and Gregory A. Smith's place-based education. Therefore, this article aims to explore how children's literature can serve as a pedagogical bridge connecting place-based education, cultural sustainability, and early childhood education.

2. THE CONNECTION BETWEEN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE AND PLACE-BASED EDUCATION

Gregory A. Smith is Professor Emeritus at the Graduate School of Education and Counseling, Lewis & Clark College, Portland, Oregon, USA. His scholarship focuses on how educators can contribute to the regeneration and sustainability of both social and biotic communities through educational practice. Smith's early academic work centered on ecological education, and in his book Ecological Education in Action: On Weaving Education, Culture, and the Environment, he further emphasized the local dimension of ecological education. Smith identified seven principles of ecological education, the second of which proposes that learning should be grounded in a sense of place and informed by the knowledge of local elders, as well as through the exploration of the surrounding natural and human-built environments (National Education Policy Center, 2024; Shih, 2022, 2024d; Smith & Williams, 1999). Smith further argues that educators should "make room for the value of the local" in their educational practice. He contends that this is far from being a radical proposition; rather, valuing the local was an essential component of education across cultures long before the emergence of Western-style schooling. However, within contemporary school systems, children frequently experience a disconnect between their lived experiences in their communities and what they encounter in the classroom (Smith & Sobel, 2010, 2020). Consequently, place-based education seeks to reconnect schooling with local contexts by grounding learning in students' communities and natural environments. Through this approach, learning becomes more authentic, meaningful, and culturally relevant, enabling students to develop a stronger sense of place while fostering deeper connections with their local communities and environments (Butzow & Butzow, 1989, 1999; National Education Policy Center, 2024; Shih, 2022, 2024d; Smith & Sobel, 2010; Smith & Williams, 1999). In summary, children's literature and place-based education are closely aligned both theoretically and pedagogically, as both emphasize that meaningful learning should be grounded in children's lived experiences, cultural contexts, and authentic environments. From the perspective of Gregory A. Smith's theory of place-based education, children's literature functions not only as a medium for language and literacy development but also as an important bridge connecting local culture, community life, and children's everyday experiences. The relationship between children's literature and place-based education can be understood from several perspectives.

2.1 Children's literature as a narrative medium for place

Smith (2002) argues that place is not merely a geographical location but a meaningful context shaped by history, culture, natural environments, social relationships, and the everyday lives of community members. Children's literature, particularly picture books and stories that depict local culture, community life, natural environments, and local history, transforms these place-based experiences into narrative forms that are meaningful and accessible to young children. Through reading stories rooted in local contexts, children not only acquire knowledge about their communities but also develop an understanding of local ways of life, cultural values, and the relationships between people and their environments. Such experiences foster children's emotional attachment to place and contribute to the development of a strong sense of place.

2.2 Children's literature promotes experiential and situated learning

Place-based education emphasizes that meaningful learning should emerge from children's lived experiences rather than from abstract knowledge presented solely in classroom settings. Children's literature can serve as an effective starting point for place-based learning experiences. For example, after reading a picture book about a local marketplace, children may visit the market to observe community life firsthand. Stories about rivers, forests, or other natural environments can be followed by field observations and outdoor explorations, while narratives about Indigenous communities may be enriched through interactions with community elders who share their cultural knowledge and lived experiences. By integrating storytelling with firsthand exploration, dialogue, observation, and experiential activities, children's literature transforms reading from an isolated literacy activity into a meaningful, contextually grounded learning process. Such integration enables children to construct knowledge through authentic engagement with their local environments while strengthening the connections among literature, community, and lived experience (Shavit, 1986).

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3. REFLECTIONS

One of the primary strengths of place-based education lies in its adaptability to the unique characteristics of particular localities. This flexibility enables teachers to bridge the disconnection between schooling and children's everyday lives that exists in many educational settings. By engaging learners with their local environments, place-based education allows schools to strengthen rather than diminish students' sense of place and belonging (Smith, 2002). Smith's conceptualization of place-based education challenges the traditional view of schooling that treats knowledge as abstract, universal, and detached from lived experience. Instead, he argues that learning should be grounded in the places where learners live and develop. Place is understood not merely as a geographical location but as a meaningful social and cultural context shaped by natural environments, historical memories, cultural traditions, community practices, and interpersonal relationships. Consequently, place-based education extends beyond the simple use of local resources as teaching materials. Rather, it engages learners in investigating the dynamic relationships among themselves, their communities, and their environments through authentic and meaningful experiences, thereby cultivating a deeper sense of place. From a constructivist perspective, Smith's theory emphasizes that knowledge is actively constructed through learners' interactions with authentic environments rather than passively transmitted by teachers. Through community exploration, dialogue with local residents, participation in everyday practices, and engagement with local cultural narratives, learners connect new understandings with their prior experiences, transforming learning into a situated and personally meaningful process. This perspective is particularly relevant to early childhood education, where young children's learning is closely connected to their immediate surroundings. Through interactions with families, communities, and natural environments, children gradually develop understandings of their cultural identities, communities, and relationships with the natural world. Smith's emphasis on the knowledge of local elders further highlights the close relationship between place-based education and cultural transmission. In the context of globalization and rapid social change, local knowledge, traditional practices, and collective memories are increasingly vulnerable to marginalization. Recognizing elders as important contributors to knowledge construction therefore not only promotes intergenerational learning but also enables children to appreciate the values, wisdom, and ethical traditions embedded within local cultures. This emphasis aligns closely with Indigenous educational perspectives that value elders, oral traditions, and the continuity of cultural heritage. Within early childhood education, place-based education also provides a valuable theoretical foundation for integrating children's literature into curriculum design. Stories, picture books, and narratives grounded in local contexts enable young children to explore community histories, cultural traditions, and natural environments through perspectives that are meaningful to their own lives. Children's literature thus serves not only as a medium for language and literacy development but also as a bridge connecting children's lived experiences with local cultural memories. Through storytelling, dialogue, and shared reflection, children construct cultural understanding, develop a sense of belonging, and strengthen their place identity. Moreover, place-based education resonates strongly with the principles of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), which emphasize the interdependence of environmental sustainability, cultural continuity, social responsibility, and community well-being. By exploring local environments and participating in culturally meaningful learning experiences, young children develop respect for cultural diversity, care for the natural world, and a sense of responsibility for contributing to sustainable communities. Accordingly, Smith's theory of place-based education not only redefines the relationship between schools and communities but also provides a coherent pedagogical framework that integrates place, culture, sustainability, and lived experience to support holistic learning and children's long-term development (Shih, 2024a, 2024b, 2024c).

4. CONCLUSION

This article has explored the theoretical relationship between children's literature and Gregory A. Smith's concept of place-based education, arguing that children's literature serves as an important pedagogical bridge connecting young children with their local communities, cultural heritage, and natural environments. Rather than functioning solely as a resource for language and literacy development, children's literature provides meaningful opportunities for children to engage with local histories, cultural traditions, community life, and lived experiences. Through stories rooted in local contexts, children are able to develop a stronger sense of place, construct cultural identity, and cultivate a deeper appreciation of the relationships between people, culture, and the environment. From the perspective of place-based education, meaningful learning emerges through authentic engagement with the places where children live. Children's literature complements this educational philosophy by transforming local knowledge and community experiences into narratives that are accessible, engaging, and developmentally appropriate for young learners. When integrated with dialogue, community exploration, experiential learning, and interactions with local elders and community members, children's literature enriches children's understanding of their communities while strengthening their sense of belonging and social responsibility. Furthermore, integrating children's literature into place-based education contributes significantly to the realization of the core principles of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD). By fostering respect for cultural diversity, preserving local cultural heritage, strengthening community connections, and encouraging active participation in local life, children's literature supports cultural sustainability, social inclusion, and community well-being. This educational approach also aligns closely with Taiwan's *Early Childhood Education and Care Curriculum Framework*, which emphasizes holistic child development, cultural appreciation, social participation, and respect for life. Overall, this study highlights that children's literature extends beyond its traditional role as a medium for literacy instruction and should be recognized as an important educational resource for promoting place-based learning, cultural sustainability, and early childhood education. Future research may further investigate how place-based children's literature can be implemented across diverse educational settings, examine teachers' instructional practices and professional development in place-based pedagogy, and explore its potential contributions to Indigenous education, intercultural learning, and community-based curriculum development. Such research would further advance the theoretical and practical integration of children's literature and place-based education while contributing to the cultivation of culturally responsive, socially responsible, and globally minded future citizens.

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