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Constructing the Value of Care in Early Childhood Literature Education: The Conceptual Framework

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ABSTRACT: The central concern of this paper is to explore how the value of **care** can be meaningfully integrated into early childhood literature education through appropriate pedagogical approaches, enabling young children to gradually internalize care as a meaningful value and translate it into concrete caring attitudes and practices. To this end, the paper proposes a conceptual framework: Literary Reading → Emotional Awareness → Understanding Others → Internalization of Caring Values → Caring Practice. This framework conceptualizes early childhood literature as more than a medium for promoting language and cognitive development; rather, it positions literary experiences as a meaningful context for fostering emotional awareness, empathic understanding, moral and value development, and caring action. Through engagement with literary narratives, characters, and emotional experiences, young children are encouraged to recognize, interpret, and reflect upon emotions, while developing an understanding of the feelings, needs, and perspectives of others. Through this process, caring values can gradually become internalized and subsequently expressed through caring attitudes and practices in children's everyday social interactions. Accordingly, early childhood literature education can serve not only as a means of supporting children's linguistic and cognitive development but also as an important pedagogical context for cultivating their capacity to care for themselves, others, and the world around them.

KEYWORDS: care, children's literature, young children

1. INTRODUCTION

Within the cultural context of Chinese society, care is not only a fundamental ethical value that guides interpersonal relationships but also a core educational value that should be emphasized in early childhood literature education. Children's literature offers rich emotional experiences and value-laden narratives that enable young children to develop empathy, concern for others, and respect for life through story contexts, character interactions, and dialogic reading. Accordingly, integrating the value of care into the curriculum and teaching practices of early childhood literature education is of considerable educational significance and serves as an important means of fostering children's holistic character development and socio-emotional competence (Nikolajeva, 2014; Noddings, 1986, 2002; Rosenblatt, 1978; Sipe, 2008; Shih, 2024, 2025, 2026a, 2026b; Shih & Kao, 2025, 2025; Tu, 1985; UNESCO, 2021). Against this background, the central concern of this paper is to explore how the value of care can be effectively integrated into early childhood literature education through appropriate pedagogical approaches, enabling young children to internalize the value of care and translate it into caring attitudes and behaviors.

2. LITERARINESS AND THE FORMATION OF CARING VALUES IN EARLY CHILDHOOD

The concept of literariness has long been critically examined within literary theory and cognitive psychology. Some postmodern literary theorists have questioned whether literary texts possess essential characteristics that clearly distinguish them from other types of texts. Meanwhile, cognitive psychology has tended to situate literary comprehension within general frameworks of discourse processing and text comprehension. However, empirical studies of literary reading suggest that readers' responses to literary works exhibit certain features of literariness that cannot be fully reduced to general models of text processing. Research examining readers' responses to literary texts, including short stories and poems, indicates that literary reading may involve cognitive and psychological processes that extend beyond the explanatory scope of existing situation models. Accordingly, literariness can be understood as involving three interrelated components: foregrounded stylistic or narrative features, readers' defamiliarizing responses to these features, and the consequent modification of personal meanings. This perspective suggests that literary reading is not simply a process of receiving information or comprehending a text; rather, it is an experiential process through which readers may reconsider, interpret, and reconstruct meaning. In the context of early childhood literature education, literary reading should likewise not be viewed merely as a means of promoting language comprehension and cognitive development. Through stories, illustrations, characters, and narrative contexts, young children engage in meaningful literary experiences and encounter diverse emotions, relationships, and perspectives. In particular, the emotions, experiences, choices, and interpersonal interactions of literary characters provide children with opportunities to imagine and understand others' internal states and life circumstances. As children identify the emotions of characters, they may gradually develop greater awareness of their own emotions and those of others.

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In this sense, literary reading can serve as an important medium through which children move from "understanding texts" to "understanding others," while providing meaningful contexts for developing emotional awareness, perspective-taking, and empathic understanding. Furthermore, the educational significance of literariness lies not simply in what moral messages a story conveys, but in how literary forms and narrative experiences can encourage children to reconsider, understand, and interpret themselves and the worlds of others. When children encounter characters, situations, and emotional experiences that differ from their own, the defamiliarizing experience generated through literature may enable them to temporarily move beyond their existing cognitive and emotional frameworks and reconsider others' feelings and needs from different perspectives. In this respect, literary reading extends beyond language and cognitive learning and offers important educational possibilities for emotional development, empathic understanding, and value formation. From the perspective of care, early childhood literature can therefore be understood as an important medium for the formation and internalization of caring values. Through literary narratives, children first encounter characters' emotions and life experiences, thereby developing Emotional Awareness. As they attempt to understand characters' feelings, needs, and circumstances, they gradually develop the capacity for Understanding Others. Through sustained literary experiences and dialogue, these emotional responses and understandings may gradually develop into value orientations concerning others, relationships, and social interaction, leading to the Internalization of Caring Values. Ultimately, these internalized values may be expressed through caring attitudes and behaviors in everyday life, resulting in Caring Practice. Accordingly, this paper proposes the following conceptual framework: Literary Reading → Emotional Awareness → Understanding Others → Internalization of Caring Values → Caring Practice. This framework highlights that the educational value of early childhood literature should not be limited to "teaching children to care through stories." Rather, attention should be given to how children experience, understand, interpret, and gradually internalize caring values through literary engagement. In other words, care should not be regarded as a moral lesson externally imposed upon literary education. Instead, through the emotional experiences, defamiliarization, perspective-taking, and meaning-making afforded by literary experiences, caring can gradually be transformed from a literary experience into an internalized value and, ultimately, into caring practice. Thus, the theoretical pathway can be conceptualized as: Literariness → Literary Experience → Emotional Awareness → Empathic Understanding → Caring Values → Caring Practice. This perspective helps clarify why early childhood literature can serve as a meaningful medium for care education and how literary experiences may contribute to the internalization and enactment of caring values in young children (Miall & Kuiken, 1999; Nikolajeva, 2013; Oatley, 2016).

3. THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK OF CARE EDUCATION THROUGH EARLY CHILDHOOD LITERATURE

Through appropriate pedagogical strategies, the value of care can be meaningfully integrated into early childhood literature education. Literary experiences can provide children with opportunities to explore emotions, relationships, moral dilemmas, and diverse perspectives, thereby supporting their social and emotional development. Through storylines, character experiences, and dialogic interactions, children are guided to recognize and understand emotions and, in turn, to appreciate others' feelings, needs, and circumstances. Such engagement with literary characters and narrative perspectives can foster empathy and perspective-taking. Building on these experiences, children can gradually develop and internalize values such as care, respect, empathy, and mutual support through meaningful dialogue and social interaction. These processes enable children to connect the emotional understanding and value awareness developed through literary reading with their everyday experiences and relationships, thereby translating literary experiences into meaningful caring practices (Dewey, 1934; Keen, 2007; Mar et al., 2009; Nikolajeva, 2013; Noddings, 2013; Oatley, 2016; Vygotsky, 1978). Five stages of the framework:

3.1 Literary Reading

Through stories, illustrations, characters, and narrative contexts, young children engage in meaningful literary experiences that expose them to diverse emotions, interpersonal relationships, and perspectives, thereby providing important opportunities for the development of emotional understanding, social interaction, and values. Such literary reading experiences not only enhance children's understanding of their own and others' emotions and circumstances but also gradually foster the development and internalization of caring literacy through sustained emotional experiences, dialogue, and meaning-making. When children are able to extend the emotional understanding and caring values developed through literary reading into their everyday lives and interpersonal relationships, literary experiences can further enrich their life experiences and deepen their understanding of themselves, others, and the world around them, thereby contributing to a richer sense of meaning in life (Nikolajeva, 2013; Oatley, 2016). Therefore, literary reading can be regarded as an important starting point for the development of children's caring literacy. Through the gradual processes of emotional awareness, understanding others, and value internalization, literary experiences can ultimately extend into children's everyday caring practices, further enriching their life experiences and sense of meaning in life.

3.2 Emotional Awareness

Young children can be guided through stories to recognize and explore characters' emotions, feelings, and psychological states. Engagement with and emotional connections to fictional characters provide children with opportunities to understand and reflect on emotional experiences, thereby promoting emotional understanding and social-emotional development (Kucirkova, 2019; Oatley, 2016). Furthermore, children's literature not only provides learning materials for emotional recognition and affective understanding but also serves as an important medium through which young children can understand the inner worlds of others. Characters in stories often have diverse life backgrounds, needs, emotional experiences, and motivations for their actions. Through reading or listening to stories, young children can draw on characters' experiences and actions to understand their emotions, thoughts, and perspectives and further consider the reasons underlying their behaviors. This process can help young children gradually develop an understanding of others' psychological states and related social-cognitive abilities (Djikic et al., 2013; Mar et al., 2009). In other words, literary reading enables young children to enter different emotional and life worlds through the stories of others and, through imagination, understanding, and reflection, gradually develop an understanding of other people.

3.3. Understanding Others

Through perspective-taking and dialogic interactions, children develop an understanding of others' emotions, needs, and circumstances, thereby fostering empathy and social understanding (Keen, 2007; Mar et al., 2009). In Confucian thought, Confucius's concept of ren (仁) is often

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understood as “loving others” (愛人) and “universal love for all” (泛愛眾). Human beings possess an inherent capacity to love those close to them, care for others, and be concerned about the world. This affective disposition, which Mencius referred to as the “heart of compassion” (惻隱之心), can be regarded as the beginning of ren and as an important foundation for children’s moral development. Based on this perspective, Li (1995, pp. 68–69) argues that: “Benevolence and love involve respect for and care for life. Their objects encompass all human beings and other forms of life and extend further to include the natural environment and the humanistic world. Accordingly, benevolence begins with cherishing, respecting, and accepting one’s own existence. It then extends from cherishing oneself to filial respect for parents, respect for teachers and elders, affection for siblings, care for classmates and friends, and concern for society and others. Ultimately, through qin qin ren min (‘being affectionate toward one’s family and extending benevolence to the people’), one reaches the state of ren min ai wu (‘being benevolent toward people and caring for all things’). In other words, all forms of life and nonliving entities—including the natural environment, cultural institutions, and world peace—may become objects of love and care” (as cited in Li, 2005, pp. 25–26). This Confucian perspective provides an important philosophical foundation for understanding care as a means of practicing moral education in early childhood. If ren begins with compassion and gradually expands from care for oneself to care for others, society, nature, and the broader world, then care is not merely an externally imposed moral rule or behavioral requirement. Rather, it is a relational and experiential process through which children gradually develop an awareness of others’ needs, feelings, and circumstances and learn to respond to them appropriately. Through perspective-taking and dialogic interactions, children develop an understanding of others’ emotions, needs, and circumstances, thereby fostering empathy and social understanding (Keen, 2007; Mar et al., 2009).

3.4. Internalization of Caring Values

Empathy has been heralded as the key remedy to solve the disparities between major divisions in the currently interconnected globalized world (Krznaric, 2014), including countering toxic masculinity or the isolation and jealousy created by social media. As part of this encompassing role for empathy, there is an increasingly popular view among several authors, publishers, educators and literacy organizations, that storybook reading is the primary strategy to nurture children’s empathy skills (Kucirkova, 2019)

Through stories, discussion, and interactive experiences, children develop an understanding of values such as respect, empathy, care, and mutual support. From a care-ethics perspective, care is not merely an abstract moral principle but is developed through relationships, attentiveness, dialogue, and responsive action (Noddings, 2013).

3.5 Caring Practice

Children extend the emotional understanding and caring values developed through literary reading into everyday contexts and translate them into concrete actions. Such movement from experience and reflection toward action is consistent with Dewey’s view of education as an experiential and socially situated process (Dewey, 1934; Mele et al, 2025).

4. FROM LITERARY READING TO CARING PRACTICE

Children’s literature instruction emphasizes grounding pedagogy in young learners’ lived experiences and interests. Developmentally appropriate literary selections—such as fairytales, picture books, nursery rhymes, and folk tales—serve tofoster children's cognitive and emotional engagement (Shih,2024). Literary Reading → Emotional Awareness → Understanding Others → Internalization of Caring Values → Caring Practice. This framework conceptualizes early childhood literature as more than a medium for language and cognitive development. Rather, literary experiences can become a context for emotional awareness, empathic understanding, moral and value development, and caring action (Dewey, 1934; Keen, 2007; Noddings, 2013).

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