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Developing an Autumn-Themed Waldorf Curriculum for Early Childhood Education

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ABSTRACT : Through seasonal life experiences, exploration of nature, and cultural activities, young children can gradually develop an understanding of the interdependent relationship between humans and nature while cultivating respect and care for life, the environment, and the community. From this perspective, the Waldorf curriculum does not merely use nature as a teaching resource; rather, it regards nature as an important context for children's living, learning, and life experiences, thereby advancing the ideals of holistic education and sustainability education.

Accordingly, this article analyzes the educational practices of an autumn-themed Waldorf curriculum with the aim of exploring the relationships among seasonality, nature, culture, and young children's learning. It also seeks to provide early childhood educators and preschool teachers implementing Waldorf education with practical references for curriculum design and pedagogical practice.

KEYWORDS: Early Childhood Education, Waldorf Curriculum, Young Children

1.INTRODUCTION

"Waldorf Education" or, alternately, "Anthroposophic Education," from the perspective of the spiritual outlook on which it is founded. Waldorf education emphasizes that meaningful learning emerges from young children's direct interaction with nature and their authentic experiences in everyday life. Rather than viewing nature merely as an object of scientific observation, Waldorf education regards the natural environment as an essential context for fostering children's cognitive, emotional, aesthetic, and spiritual development (Edmunds, 2004; Goldshmidt, 2017; Steiner, 1996a, 1996b). An autumn-themed curriculum, for example, provides young children with rich and authentic learning opportunities through which they can personally experience the rhythms of nature, observe seasonal changes, and gradually develop attitudes that support harmonious coexistence with the natural world (Nicol & Taplin, 2012). Morning verses, songs, rhythmic movement activities, and nature-based experiences constitute important pedagogical elements of Waldorf education (Steiner, 1996). Through participation in these activities, children cultivate concentration, gratitude, imagination, and a sense of respect and reverence for life, while simultaneously deepening their emotional connection with the natural world. Through repeated observation and experience of the changing seasons, children gradually develop keen observational skills, emotional regulation abilities, and an awareness of the interdependent relationship between humans and nature. Such a learning process extends beyond the mere transmission of knowledge. Instead, it integrates multiple dimensions of development, including cognition, emotion, physical engagement, and moral growth, thereby promoting the holistic development of young children (Edmunds, 2004; Nicol & Taplin, 2012; Woods et al., 2005). Furthermore, the autumn-themed curriculum examined in this study provides young children with opportunities to connect the local ecological environment with cultural traditions. Through participation in harvest activities, seasonal festivals, exploration of natural materials, and community-based cultural experiences, children can gradually come to understand nature as an integral part of everyday life rather than merely as abstract knowledge. This approach is consistent with the Waldorf educational emphasis on seasonal rhythms, experiences of nature, practical life activities, and cultural practices. At the same time, this experience-based approach is consistent with the developmental characteristics of young children, who construct knowledge and understanding through active participation, sensory exploration, and meaningful everyday experiences (Dewey, 1938; Edwards, 2002; Steiner, 1996a, 1996b). This approach also aligns with contemporary perspectives on environmental education and

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education for sustainable development, which emphasize cultivating environmental awareness, ecological responsibility, and respect for life and nature from early childhood. Research has indicated that direct contact with natural environments can help children develop a sense of connectedness to nature, positive environmental attitudes, and ecological awareness, while early experiences with nature may provide an important foundation for later environmental concern and sustainable action (Chawla, 2006; Davis, 2009; Wilson, 1993). Therefore, integrating local natural environments and seasonal cultural experiences into early childhood curricula has significance not only for cognitive and cultural learning but also for fostering children's emotional connections with and sense of belonging to their local environments. From the perspective of early childhood education, integrating seasonal experiences into the curriculum can contribute to children's well-being and positive development. Natural environments can stimulate children's curiosity, creativity, attention, and social interaction while providing safe and meaningful contexts for learning. In particular, the open-ended materials and activities found in natural environments provide children with opportunities for exploration, imagination, and creativity, thereby supporting multiple dimensions of their development, including physical, emotional, and social development (Kellert, 2005; Louv, 2005; Warden, 2012). This curriculum orientation, which emphasizes nature, everyday life, and holistic development, is also consistent with the Waldorf educational philosophy of integrating the development of the body, emotions, will, and cognition as part of whole-person education (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Edwards, 2002; Steiner, 1996). From this perspective, the Waldorf curriculum demonstrates the educational value of nature-based education. It not only cultivates children's sense of belonging, aesthetic sensibility, and appreciation of the beauty of nature but also contributes to the development of a lifelong disposition toward living harmoniously with the natural world (Chawla, 2006; Wilson, 1992). Through seasonal life experiences, exploration of nature, and cultural activities, children can gradually develop an understanding of the interdependent relationship between human beings and nature and cultivate respect and care for life, the environment, and the community. From this perspective, the Waldorf curriculum does not merely use nature as instructional material; rather, it regards nature as an important context for children's living, learning, and lived experiences, thereby contributing to the realization of the ideals of holistic education and education for sustainability. Accordingly, this study analyzes the teaching practices of an autumn-themed Waldorf curriculum to explore the relationships among seasons, nature, culture, and young children's learning. It also aims to provide a practical reference for early childhood educators and preschool teachers in curriculum design and pedagogical practice when implementing Waldorf-inspired curricula.

2. RUDOLF STEINER

Rudolf Steiner grew up in a working-class family but received a strong academic education. At the age of 18, he was awarded a scholarship and began pursuing interdisciplinary academic studies, eventually developing Anthroposophy, a spiritual and philosophical approach centered on human spiritual development and wisdom. In his concept of the Threefold Social Order, "liberty" was regarded as an important principle of social reform, particularly concerning freedom in culture, religion, and education. In addition, in his essay The Education of the Child, Steiner argued that education should support children's natural development and enable them to become individuals with free will and creative capacities, rather than being constrained by mechanistic forms of education. In 1919, Steiner established the first Waldorf school in Stuttgart, Germany, and implemented his educational philosophy through a creative curriculum that emphasized children's holistic development and their growth as whole individuals (Attfield, 2024).

3. AN AUTUMN-THEMED WALDORF CURRICULUM

3.1 Activity Title

Morning Circle: The Harvest Season

3.2 Class and Number of Children

Class: Star Class (Senior Class)

Number of Children: 10

3.3 Activity Format

☑ Whole-group activity □ Learning Centers □ Small-group activity □ Individual activity

3.4 Total Teaching Time

30 minutes

3.5 Analysis of Children's Prerequisite Knowledge and Experiences

If children have accumulated everyday experiences related to the autumn season and the natural environment, such as observing changes in weather, encountering fallen leaves, fruits, and crops, or participating in harvesting and sharing food, they can bring these existing experiences into the morning circle activity. Through these prior experiences, children will be able to: Naturally participate in poetry, singing, rhythm, and movement during the morning circle. Develop an initial understanding of natural and everyday images such as the sun, earth, autumn, and harvest. Transform sensory experiences into verbal, musical, and bodily expressions. Develop an emotional connection with, appreciation of, and respect for nature through experiencing seasonal changes. Develop experiences of cooperation, turn-taking, imitation, and peer interaction through participation in group activities.

3.6 Learning Domains

Physical Movement and Health

The activity also integrates the following learning domains: Aesthetics, Language, and Social Development.

3.7 Learning Objectives

This activity uses the theme of "The Harvest Season" and integrates morning-circle routines, poetry, singing, rhythm, movement, and natural imagery to guide children in experiencing seasonal changes and the rhythms of nature. Children will be able to: Experience the natural changes and characteristics of autumn and develop awareness of seasonal and environmental changes. Through poetry, singing, rhythm, and movement, experience the beauty of language, music, and bodily expression. Use bodily movements to represent natural images such as the sun, earth, seeds,

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crops, and harvest, thereby developing bodily coordination and expressive abilities. Develop feelings of gratitude toward the earth, appreciation of food, and care for nature through experiencing the process of harvest. Enhance their abilities in oral expression, listening, imitation, and peer interaction through participation in the group morning-circle activity. Develop experiences of cooperation, sharing, and collaborative participation through group singing, movement, and games.

3.8 Learning Indicators

Physical Movement and Health Domain

Physical Movement—Senior 1-1-1

Recognize the coordination of the body in performing stability and locomotor movements.

Physical Movement—Senior 1-1-2

Imitate dynamic balance movements.

Physical Movement—Senior 1-3-3

Recognize and maintain a safe distance from others during physical activities.

Aesthetic Domain

Aesthetics—Senior 2-2-4

Express feelings through musical elements such as pitch, dynamics, and tempo.

3.9 Activity Objectives

3.9.1 Establish a connection with nature through morning poems and rhythmic movement, and learn to greet and express gratitude to the sun and the earth.

3.9.2 Recognize seasonal changes in autumn, such as cooler temperatures, changing leaf colors, and the ripening of crops.

3.9.3 Through songs and rhymes such as “The Farmer and the Squirrel” and “Harvest,” experience the joy of work, sharing, and the abundance of the harvest season.

3.9.4 Develop concentration and a sense of balance through bodily movement and rhythmic activities.

3.10 Development of the Six Core Competencies

3.10.1 Awareness and Discrimination:

Through singing and rhythmic movement activities such as “Good Morning, Dear Sun” and “Cool Autumn Weather,” children become aware of natural phenomena, including cooler temperatures, wind moving through the trees, changes in sunlight, and other seasonal changes.

3.10.2 Reasoning and Appreciation:

By observing changes in the colors of autumn leaves and the ripening of fruits and crops, children begin to reason about the relationship between seasonal and climatic changes. They also appreciate the rhythm and imagery of poetry, such as the expression “The maple leaves shyly blush,” and develop an awareness of the aesthetic qualities of nature.

3.10.3 Imagination and Creativity:

Through “Little Angel” and “The Farmer and the Squirrel,” children use their imagination to explore interactions among angels, animals, and nature. Through bodily movement, creative expression, and extended activities—such as leaf printing and autumn-themed artwork—children express their own perceptions and imaginative representations of the autumn landscape.

4. TEACHING REFLECTION

This “Morning Circle: The Harvest Season” activity was designed around the natural changes of autumn and used morning poetry, rhymes, singing, and rhythmic movement to guide children to draw upon their everyday experiences and experience the characteristics of the autumn season and the imagery of harvest. Throughout the activity, the children participated naturally in singing and bodily movement and expressed their feelings toward the sun, the earth, crops, and the natural environment through physical actions. Compared with directly transmitting factual knowledge about autumn, the rhythmic experiences created through poetry and movement were more effective in stimulating children’s interest and engagement. This approach is consistent with the Waldorf educational emphasis on rhythm, imagination, sensory experience, and children’s connection with nature (Steiner, 1996; Nicol, 2010). During the activity, it was observed that children had different life experiences related to “harvest” and “autumn.” Some children immediately associated autumn with falling leaves, fruits, and cooler weather, whereas others drew upon family experiences, sharing stories about eating fruit, seeing crops, or engaging in outdoor activities with their families. These diverse life experiences became important resources for learning. From a constructivist perspective, children actively construct knowledge by connecting new experiences with their existing understandings and experiences (Piaget, 1952; Vygotsky, 1978). Therefore, teachers should avoid assuming that children share the same understanding of autumn. Instead, through open-ended questions and attentive listening, teachers can provide children with opportunities to express their own observations, interpretations, and feelings. The rhythmic movement activities also revealed individual differences among the children. Some children were able to quickly grasp the movements and rhythms, whereas others needed repeated imitation and peer modeling before they could gradually participate. Therefore, teachers should avoid placing excessive emphasis on uniformity of movement and instead provide sufficient time and space for children to participate according to their individual physical abilities and developmental rhythms. Such an approach is consistent with the Waldorf emphasis on natural development, rhythm, and respect for individual differences (Steiner, 1996; Nicol, 2010). This activity also reminded the teacher that the morning circle is not merely a way to begin the day; it can also become an important educational moment for children to develop relationships with nature, themselves, and their peers. Through images and experiences such as “greeting the sun,” “expressing gratitude to the earth,” and “sharing the harvest,” children learn not only about the natural characteristics of autumn but also gradually develop feelings of appreciation, gratitude, and respect for nature. Such experiences are consistent with the view that children’s direct engagement with nature can support environmental awareness, emotional connection, and caring attitudes toward the natural world (Louv, 2005; Wilson, 1993). In this way, the activity extends beyond a simple seasonal-themed lesson to encompass

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aesthetic education, life education, and emotional education. If the activity is implemented again, opportunities for children to interact with authentic natural materials could be further expanded. For example, teachers could guide children in observing fallen leaves, fruits, and seeds and incorporate these natural materials into activities such as leaf printing, an autumn nature table, seed-based creations, and harvest-themed art activities. Direct engagement with natural materials can provide children with sensory, exploratory, and creative experiences, while open-ended materials can encourage children to observe, experiment, imagine, and express their own ideas (Dewey, 1934; Edwards et al, 2011; Eisner, 2002; Shih, 2020, 2022). In this way, children can move from "hearing autumn, singing autumn, and moving autumn" toward "seeing autumn, touching autumn, and creating autumn," allowing their seasonal experiences to be expressed more fully through sensory exploration, bodily movement, and artistic expression. Overall, this activity encouraged the teacher to reconsider the idea that children's learning does not necessarily begin with the transmission of knowledge; rather, it can begin with a poem, a movement, a fallen leaf, a gentle autumn breeze, or children's authentic experiences of nature. This perspective echoes Dewey's (1934) understanding of education as an experiential process in which meaningful learning emerges through children's interactions with their environments. Future curriculum design will therefore continue to build upon children's everyday experiences and the natural environment, using rhythm, art, play, and collaborative participation to create learning experiences that are more meaningful, life-centered, and aesthetically rich (Dewey, 1934; Steiner, 1996; Nicol, 2010).

5. CONCLUSION

In the contemporary theoretical and practical context of early childhood education, school-based or center-based curriculum development has gradually emerged as a core issue in Taiwan's early childhood education policy discourse and pedagogical practice. Against this backdrop, the Preschool Affiliated with Shiding Elementary School in New Taipei City, Taiwan, has developed a distinctive curriculum grounded primarily in Waldorf education. The curriculum integrates Waldorf principles with Shiding's local cultural and ecological resources, placing particular emphasis on nature and ecology, artistic activities, and life education. Through experiential and seasonal learning, children are encouraged to observe changes in the natural environment, engage in artistic expression, and connect learning with everyday life. In particular, the development of an autumn-themed curriculum provides children with opportunities to explore seasonal changes and develop an appreciation of nature, beauty, and local culture. This approach demonstrates how school-based curriculum development can integrate educational philosophy with local contexts to create meaningful and culturally responsive learning experiences for young children. Furthermore, the curriculum demonstrates how local culture and Waldorf educational principles can be meaningfully integrated into early childhood education. By connecting nature and ecology, artistic activities, and life education, the curriculum provides children with holistic and experiential learning opportunities. Using autumn and seasonal changes as the central theme, children are encouraged to observe nature, explore their surroundings, engage in artistic expression, and connect learning with everyday life. Such a curriculum not only enhances children's awareness of seasonal and ecological changes but also strengthens their appreciation of beauty, connection to local culture, and care for nature. Overall, the integration of Shiding's local cultural resources with Waldorf-inspired education offers a place-based and aesthetically oriented approach to fostering children's holistic development. Finally, this study is grounded in the local culture of Shiding and centered on the educational philosophy of Waldorf education. It integrates three major instructional domains—nature and ecology, artistic activities, and life education—as the core axes of curriculum development. Through learning experiences closely connected to children's everyday lives, the curriculum aims to foster children's capacity to experience and express love, appreciate beauty, and care for nature, thereby promoting their holistic physical and emotional development. The curriculum adopts "Autumn" as its central theme and incorporates seasonal changes and the characteristics of the natural environment. Through observation, exploration, artistic creation, and hands-on life experiences, children are guided to perceive the changes of the seasons, understand the distinctive features of the autumn environment, and develop a deeper understanding of and emotional connection to local culture and the natural ecology through meaningful interactions with the land, nature, and everyday life (Chiang et al, 2026; Shih, 2026a, 2026b; Ye & Shih, 2021).

Finally, because Steiner's curriculum ideas encompass multiple dimensions and levels, his educational philosophy can be understood by first examining general principles applicable to teaching as a whole and then extending the discussion to specific curriculum principles relevant to particular age groups and subject areas. In addition, Waldorf education places considerable emphasis on the teacher's role and educational practice. Becoming a Waldorf teacher involves not only developing pedagogical knowledge and competencies but also understanding, embracing, and enacting Waldorf educational principles, as well as integrating these principles into everyday life and professional practice. In other words, Waldorf teachers are not merely implementers of the curriculum; through their own ways of living, educational attitudes, and professional practices, they serve as important guides and role models for children's learning and development (Dahlin, 2017).

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