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Teaching Materials and Pedagogy for the Social Domain in Taiwanese Preschools: Core Themes of Curriculum Design

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ABSTRACT: The overall issue of assessment during early childhood, and its relationship to school readiness and other educational decisions, has been widely debated. The expansion of early childhood education and care enrollment, advances in scientific knowledge about early childhood development, and increasing attention to public expenditure have necessitated careful consideration of which assessment tools should be used, as well as why and when they should be administered. More specifically, the disconnection between the recognized importance of children's social and emotional development and the relatively limited attention given to these domains in educational programming and assessment has long been a concern. In recent years, however, increasing attention has been devoted to social and emotional development during early childhood, given its importance for both concurrent and later well-being and mental health, as well as learning and academic success. Teachers often view children's "readiness to learn" and "teachability" as reflected in positive emotional expression, enthusiasm, and the ability to regulate emotions and behaviors (Denham, 2006). Accordingly, young children's social development constitutes a fundamental dimension of holistic development. It not only influences their interpersonal relationships, emotional regulation, and engagement in learning but is also closely associated with later mental health, academic achievement, and social adjustment. Through interactions with peers, teachers, family members, and the broader community, young children gradually develop competencies in communication, cooperation, empathy, problem-solving, and understanding social norms. Therefore, early childhood education should not focus exclusively on cognitive and language development but should also recognize social development and social-emotional competence as essential components of early childhood curriculum and pedagogy. Accordingly, there is a need for early childhood curricula to provide meaningful social learning experiences through which children can develop social understanding, interpersonal competence, empathy, cooperation, and a sense of belonging. This also highlights the importance of developing appropriate teaching materials and pedagogical approaches for the social domain in preschool education, particularly those grounded in children's everyday experiences and social interactions. This study explores the core issues in curriculum design for teaching materials and pedagogical approaches in the social domain of Taiwanese preschools.

KEYWORDS: Social Domain, teaching materials, young children

1. INTRODUCTION

The overall issue of assessment during early childhood, and its relation to school readiness and other decisions, is currently widely debated. Expanding early childhood education and child care enrollments, better scientific knowledge about early childhood development, and decisions about public spending, necessitate careful consideration of which assessment tools to use, as well as why and when to use them. More specifically, the disconnection between the importance of social and emotional domains of development, and their status within educational programming and assessment, has long been lamented. The last several years have, however, witnessed a blossoming of attention to these areas during early childhood, as crucial for both concurrent and later well-being and mental health, as well as learning and academic success. Teachers view children's "readiness to learn" and "teachability" as marked by positive emotional expressiveness, enthusiasm, and ability to regulate emotions and behaviors (Denham, 2006). Therefore, young children's social development is a fundamental component of their holistic development. It not only influences their interpersonal interactions, emotional regulation, and engagement in learning but is also closely related to their future mental health, academic achievement, and social adjustment. Through interactions with peers, teachers, family members, and the broader community, young children gradually develop competencies in communication, cooperation, empathy, problem-solving, and understanding social norms. Accordingly, early childhood education should not focus exclusively on cognitive and language development but should also recognize social development and social-emotional competence as essential components of curriculum and pedagogy. Social education is fundamental to young children's holistic development and later lives, while the development of social competence has received increasing attention in early childhood education worldwide. Accordingly, the Ministry of Education in Taiwan recognizes the importance of social learning during the early childhood years. Social learning does not simply involve learning social norms or following behavioral rules. Rather, it involves the gradual development of interpersonal relationships, communication, cooperation, emotional understanding, perspective-taking, and problem-solving through continuous interactions with peers, teachers, families, and the broader community. In other words, learning in the social domain is highly interactive, contextual, and

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experiential. It should therefore provide children with authentic and meaningful social contexts through which they can understand relationships between themselves and others, individuals and groups, and individuals and their social environments. From sociocultural and constructivist perspectives, children's social competence is not simply transmitted or imposed by adults; rather, it is gradually constructed through social interaction and shared activities. Vygotsky (1978) emphasized the sociocultural nature of children's cognitive and social development, arguing that individuals develop higher psychological functions through interaction with others, language, and collaborative activities. Accordingly, teaching in the social domain should move beyond excessive reliance on teacher-directed instruction and behavioral regulation and instead provide children with opportunities for interaction, discussion, cooperation, and problem solving. Through active participation, children can gradually develop an understanding of social relationships and social norms. Furthermore, children's social learning is closely connected to emotional development, interpersonal relationships, and moral development. Through interactions with others, children not only learn to understand their own emotions and needs but also develop the ability to recognize others' feelings, respect different perspectives, and gradually develop social values such as empathy, cooperation, care, respect, and responsibility. Therefore, instructional materials for the social domain should not focus exclusively on knowledge-oriented topics such as "learning about families," "learning about communities," or "understanding social rules." Instead, they should incorporate interpersonal interaction, emotional understanding, empathy, cooperation, care, respect, and social responsibility into curriculum design. With regard to teaching materials and instructional approaches, the social domain has distinctive characteristics that differentiate it from conventional knowledge-based subjects. Because young children's understanding of abstract social concepts is still developing, instructional materials should begin with children's familiar life experiences and employ stories, picture books, games, role-playing, discussion, cooperative activities, and community exploration to transform abstract social concepts into concrete, meaningful, and participatory learning experiences. In particular, stories and picture books provide contextualized narratives and interpersonal relationships that enable children to understand different ways of responding to conflict, cooperation, sharing, caring, and problem solving through the experiences of characters. Such experiences can further support the development of children's social understanding and perspective-taking abilities. Therefore, the core of teaching materials and pedagogy in the early childhood social domain should not merely concern "what social knowledge should be taught," but also "how children learn to live together with others through social experiences." In other words, curriculum and instructional material design should move from knowledge transmission toward experiential construction, from teacher-directed instruction toward interaction and dialogue, and from behavioral compliance toward deeper understanding and practice of social values. In this way, the social domain can become an important educational context for supporting children's interpersonal relationships, developing social competence, understanding their social environment, and cultivating the foundations of civic awareness (Denham & Burton, 2003; Denham, 2006; Kemple, 2004; Kostelnik et al, 2018; Lin & Shih, 2026; Odom et al, 1992; Shih, 2022a, 2024, 2025; Ministry of Education, 2017; Wilkinson & Kao, 2019). This study explores the core issues in curriculum design for teaching materials and pedagogical approaches in the social domain of Taiwanese preschools.

2. CORE THEMES OF CURRICULUM DESIGN FOR THE SOCIAL DOMAIN IN TAIWANESE PRESCHOOLS

Taiwan's *Early Childhood Education & Care Curriculum Framework* identify "social studies" as one of the six major domains of early childhood education. The guidelines emphasize that through ongoing interactions with themselves, others, and their environment, young children gradually develop competencies related to self-concept, interpersonal relationships, social norms, cooperation, and social participation. At the same time, the curriculum places particular emphasis on children's lived experiences and advocates promoting their holistic development through play, exploration, and everyday life contexts (Ministry of Education, 2017). This curricular philosophy closely corresponds with the perspective of sociocultural theory. Vygotsky (1978) argued that children's cognitive development and learning do not occur as isolated individual processes but are gradually constructed through social interaction, cultural contexts, and participation in shared activities. In other words, children's learning is embedded within specific social and cultural contexts and develops through interactions with adults, peers, and their surrounding environments. From this perspective, the social studies curriculum in early childhood education should not be viewed merely as a means of transmitting social knowledge or social norms. Rather, it should emphasize children's actual participation in social life and the construction of meaning through their experiences. Through authentic and meaningful activities situated in relevant contexts, children can gradually develop an understanding of their relationships with themselves and others, recognize the norms and values associated with group life, and enhance their understanding of and capacity to participate in their social environment through interaction, cooperation, communication, and problem-solving. Accordingly, the core of the early childhood social studies curriculum lies not only in "knowing about society" but also in "learning how to live together with others" through social interaction and lived experiences. In this process, children gradually develop the capacity to understand themselves, appreciate others, and participate actively in society (Ministry of Education, 2017; Vygotsky, 1978).

2.1 Self and Emotional Development

2.1.1 Understanding Self

Children's social development begins with an understanding of the self, including awareness of self-concept, identity, abilities, feelings, and needs. Through interactions with adults and peers, young children gradually develop an understanding of "who I am" and "how I relate to others." Such self-understanding also provides an important foundation for subsequent social interactions and the development of social competencies. Therefore, preschool curricula should provide children with opportunities to express themselves, make choices, and understand individual differences, thereby supporting the development of a positive self-concept (Erikson, 1963; Ministry of Education, 2017; Vygotsky, 1978). Preschool curricula are generally interdisciplinary rather than organized into separate subject areas, and they commonly adopt unit- or theme-based approaches to teaching. Therefore, early childhood teachers can systematically integrate life education into the curriculum to facilitate children's diverse learning experiences, rather than perceiving life education as an additional burden, an extracurricular task, or something difficult to implement. Furthermore, in preschool settings, life education can be incorporated progressively through theme-based teaching. For example, a theme such as "My Face" can serve as an entry point for children to explore their own physical characteristics, identities, emotions, and uniqueness. Through observation, discussion, artistic activities, stories, and interpersonal interactions, children can gradually develop self-awareness and an

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appreciation of individual differences, thereby laying a foundation for subsequent learning about self, others, relationships, and respect for life. Through the implementation of the theme-based curriculum "My Face," teachers can guide young children in participating in activities across different learning domains. For example, in language activities, teachers can help children identify the locations and functions of their facial features and encourage them to observe one another's facial features. Children can also be invited to identify different parts of their bodies, discuss their functions, and share their observations with peers. Alternatively, through art activities, children can draw one another's facial features, enabling them to recognize both their own lives and the lives of others. Through such interdisciplinary experiences, children can gradually develop self-awareness, an understanding of others, appreciation of individual differences, and respect for life (Li, 2015; Shih, & Wu, 2018).

2.1.2 Emotional Understanding and Empathy

Social development and emotional development are closely and reciprocally related. Young children's ability to recognize, understand, and regulate their own emotions, while gradually developing an understanding of others' emotions, needs, and perspectives, constitutes an important foundation for establishing positive interpersonal relationships and developing social competence. In this process, empathy and perspective-taking play important roles by enabling young children to understand others' emotions and behaviors from their perspectives and respond appropriately to their feelings and needs. Early childhood teachers can use a variety of activities, including stories, role-playing, group discussions, and everyday life events, to guide children in recognizing and expressing the emotions of characters and peers, exploring different perspectives and emotional experiences, and thereby fostering emotional understanding, empathy, and social interaction skills (Denham, 2006; Denham et al., 2012; Ministry of Education, 2017; Nikolajeva, 2013). Therefore, emotional understanding should not be regarded as an individual ability separate from social development; rather, it should be viewed as an essential foundation for children's learning to understand others, establish interpersonal relationships, and further develop respect and care.

2.2 Interpersonal Relationships and Social Interaction

2.2.1 Understanding Others

Young children's social learning is not an isolated individual cognitive activity; rather, it develops progressively through interactions with others. Through observation, imitation, dialogue, and cooperation, young children learn to understand others' thoughts, feelings, needs, and behavioral intentions. Therefore, curriculum design should create diverse and meaningful interpersonal contexts that provide children with opportunities to understand others from different perspectives (Ministry of Education, 2017; Vygotsky, 1978).

2.2.2 Interpersonal Interaction

Interpersonal interaction is a core component of young children's social development. Through interactions with peers and adults, young children gradually develop essential social competencies, including communication, sharing, turn-taking, negotiation, and conflict resolution. Accordingly, play, cooperative learning, and group activities can provide important educational contexts in which young children can practice and develop social interaction skills (Ministry of Education, 2017; Rubin et al., 2006).

2.2.3 Cooperation and Communication

Cooperation and communication are essential competencies for young children's participation in group life. Through engaging in shared tasks, exchanging ideas, and negotiating different needs and perspectives, young children gradually develop an understanding of cooperation while strengthening their problem-solving and social communication skills (Vygotsky, 1978; Ministry of Education, 2017). Therefore, teaching materials and learning activities should move beyond teacher-directed instruction and provide young children with meaningful opportunities for joint discussion, collaborative exploration, and problem solving.

2.2.4 Respect and Care

Respect and care involve children's ability to understand others' needs, feelings, and rights and to translate such understanding into concrete social actions. From the perspective of the ethics of care, care is not merely a set of moral rules or obligations; rather, it is a relational practice of responding to the needs of others within specific relationships and interactions (Noddings, 2013). Therefore, social-domain curricula in early childhood education can use everyday life events, stories, and cooperative activities to guide children beyond simply knowing that they should respect others toward developing and practicing concrete attitudes and behaviors of respect and care.

Preschools can promote life education through parental engagement activities, inviting parents to participate in initiatives such as flea markets, charity cookie sales, and other fundraising activities, with the proceeds donated to social welfare organizations. Such activities not only promote collaboration between families and preschools and encourage parent–child participation but also enable young children to experience care, mutual support, and reciprocity through meaningful participation. These experiences can help reduce interpersonal distance and enable children to appreciate the importance of caring for others and contributing to the community. Through such concrete life experiences, young children can gradually develop caring attitudes toward others and transform the abstract ideals of life education into concrete actions. Furthermore, care is a sincere and benevolent disposition that arises from within and constitutes an important foundation for interpersonal emotional connections. Individuals who are capable of caring for others are able to take an active interest in others, listen attentively to their thoughts and feelings, understand their circumstances, and offer assistance when needed. In other words, care involves not merely knowing what others need but also understanding their life circumstances, responding emotionally to their experiences, and translating such understanding into concrete actions. Therefore, care education within life education should not be limited to verbal instruction or moral rules. Rather, young children should be provided with authentic life experiences through which they can gradually understand and practice care in their interactions and shared everyday lives. In this process, early childhood teachers themselves serve as important models and practitioners of care. When teachers possess the professional disposition to care for young children, respect their feelings, listen to their voices, understand their needs, and provide appropriate support and responses in everyday interactions, they can create caring teaching and living environments. Within such environments, young children not only experience what it means to be cared for but also gradually learn, through observation, imitation, and active participation, what care means and how to care for others. Thus, learning to care is not confined to knowledge acquired within a particular subject area; rather, it is deeply rooted in everyday life experiences and interpersonal relationships. As Noddings' ethics of care emphasizes, care is a relational moral practice through which

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individuals learn how to care for and respond to others within concrete interpersonal relationships and lived experiences (Chen et al, 2020; Hung, 2007; Lin, 2011; Noddings, 2013; Shih, 2020, 2022a, 2022b).

Accordingly, when young children encounter care through teachers' caring practices, peer interactions, family participation, and community service, they can gradually move from "being cared for" to "understanding care," and then to "caring for others" and "caring for life." From this perspective, care is not an additional component outside life education; rather, it constitutes a central dimension of life education in early childhood. It provides an important pathway through which young children learn to respect life, understand others, and develop a sense of social responsibility.

2.3 Groups, Family, and Culture

2.3.1 Groups and Social Norms

After entering preschool, young children gradually encounter different group norms and shared ways of living, such as taking turns, sharing, following agreed-upon rules, and solving problems collectively. These experiences help children understand the rules, roles, and responsibilities involved in group life and gradually develop an initial understanding of social norms (Ministry of Education, 2017; Rogoff, 2003).

2.3.2 Family, Community, and Culture

Young children's social development is profoundly influenced by their family, community, and cultural environments. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory emphasizes that children's development is shaped by the reciprocal interactions among the family, school, community, and broader sociocultural contexts. Therefore, preschool curricula should incorporate family life, community environments, and cultural experiences into learning experiences, enabling children to develop an understanding of the relationships between themselves and their social and cultural environments.

2.4 Environment and Social Participation

2.4.1 Human–Environment Relationships

Young children's understanding of society should not be limited to interpersonal relationships but should also extend to the relationships between people, nature, and their everyday environments. Through direct engagement with natural and community environments, young children can develop observation, exploration, care, and a sense of responsibility while gradually developing an understanding of the interdependent relationships between people and their environments (Dewey, 1934; Wilson, 1993; Ministry of Education, 2017).

2.4.2 Social Participation and Responsibility

One of the ultimate aims of social education is to enable young children to move progressively from understanding society to participating in society. Through participating in classroom decision-making, collaborating on shared tasks, engaging with their communities, and jointly addressing everyday problems, young children can gradually develop a sense of belonging, responsibility, and emerging civic awareness (Ministry of Education, 2017; Rogoff, 2003). Therefore, teaching materials and pedagogical approaches in the social domain should not focus solely on "understanding society" but should also provide young children with meaningful opportunities for active participation and social practice.

3. CONCLUSION

The ability to manage one's socio-emotional behavior should no longer be regarded merely as an issue of individual adjustment or classroom management. Rather, it should be understood as an important foundation for the development of children's social and emotional competence, moral awareness, and civic competence. Through recognizing and understanding their own emotions, regulating their behavior, understanding others' feelings, respecting different perspectives, and learning to resolve interpersonal conflicts through cooperation and dialogue, young children gradually move from merely complying with external rules toward developing a deeper understanding of social relationships and the values underlying communal life. This developmental process is closely associated with the key competencies emphasized in social and emotional learning (SEL), including self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making, while also laying an important foundation for children's subsequent moral judgment, social participation, and civic responsibility. From this perspective, the purpose of social domain education in early childhood settings should not be limited to knowledge-oriented content such as "learning about families," "learning about communities," or "learning social norms." Rather, it should further guide children to learn, through authentic social interactions and everyday experiences, how to understand themselves, understand others, deal with differences, resolve conflicts, cooperate with others, and assume responsibility. In other words, the core of social domain education lies not merely in "knowing about society," but in learning "how to live together with others" through meaningful social experiences. Accordingly, the social domain curriculum in early childhood education can be regarded as an important educational context through which children move from individual development to relational development, and from relational development to social participation. Through experiences such as play, stories, picture books, role-playing, cooperative activities, discussion, and community exploration, children not only learn to regulate their own emotions and behaviors but also gradually develop social values such as empathy, care, respect, cooperation, and responsibility. Ultimately, these competencies constitute an important foundation for children's holistic development and civic awareness, enabling them to gradually become social members who are capable of understanding and caring for others, respecting differences, participating actively in society, and taking responsibility for their own actions (Chen, Chen & Chen, 2026; Denham & Burton, 2003; Denham, 2006; Kemple, 2004; Kostelnik et al, 2018; Odom et al, 1992; Shih, 2022a, 2024, 2025; Ministry of Education, 2017; Wilkinson & Kao, 2019)..

In summary, the social-domain curriculum in early childhood education can be conceptualized as a developmental progression from "self" to "others," from "interpersonal relationships" to "groups and culture," and ultimately from "social understanding" to "environmental care and social participation." Such a curriculum design, progressing from the individual to relationships, from relationships to groups, and from groups to broader social participation, not only corresponds to the fundamental characteristics of young children's social development but also aligns with the emphasis of Taiwan's *Early Childhood Education and Care Curriculum Framework* on children's everyday experiences, social interaction, and holistic development (Ministry of Education, 2017). More importantly, teaching materials and pedagogical approaches in the social domain should move beyond the transmission of knowledge and behavioral norms. Through authentic life contexts, play, stories, cooperative activities, and

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community experiences, children can gradually develop social understanding, relational competence, and social responsibility through processes of experience, interaction, reflection, and practice (Dewey, 1934; Vygotsky,1978; Rogoff, 2003).

In promoting care for life, preschools can incorporate community-based themes into the curriculum and organize activities such as Dragon Boat Festival celebrations and the Double Ninth Festival activities for older adults. Teachers can guide young children to demonstrate care through concrete actions, such as giving grandparents gentle back massages, participating in recreational group games, and expressing gratitude by serving tea. These experiences enable children to interact with older adults, experience intergenerational relationships, and develop empathy, gratitude, respect, and a willingness to care for others. In addition, parental engagement activities can provide further opportunities for children to practice caring for others. For example, preschools can organize flea markets, charity cookie sales, and other fundraising activities, with the proceeds donated to social welfare organizations. Through active participation in these activities, young children can gradually understand that caring for others involves not only emotional concern but also concrete actions and social participation. Such experiences help transform the concept of "care for life" from an abstract value into an everyday practice, thereby making life education meaningful and experiential (Shih & Wu, 2018).

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