

Integrating Tea Culture into Early Childhood Food Education: Pathways and Strategies

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Abstract: As one of the important components of the traditional culture of the Chinese nation, tea culture carries millennia of wisdom and the spirit of etiquette, and its unique connotations and significance can offer inspiration and guidance for education. Preschool education is the starting point of lifelong education and a critical foundational period for the budding of young children's cultural confidence and the formation of good behavioral habits. Food education, as the foundation for promoting young children's comprehensive development, needs to be supported by a profound cultural heritage. Integrating tea culture into children's food education can not only nourish body and mind and shape character, but also cultivate in children, through their dietary life, a sense of closeness to and belonging to China's fine traditional culture, making it an ideal bond linking cultural inheritance and food education enlightenment. Grounded in the three-dimensional framework of “natural experience—cultural immersion—life practice,” this study constructs implementation pathways from four dimensions—curriculum integration, practical experience, environment creation, and home–kindergarten collaboration—thereby providing theoretical reference and practical insights for the creative transformation of traditional culture in preschool education.

Key words: Tea culture; Early childhood food education; Cultural inheritance; Curriculum integration

1. Research Background and Significance

With the promulgation and implementation of the Preschool Education Law and the successive issuance of multiple education policies such as the Opinions on Implementing the Project for the Inheritance and Development of Excellent Traditional Chinese Culture, the full integration of traditional culture into the education system has become a clear policy requirement and a defining proposition of the times^[1]. As the starting point of the national education system, preschool education is in a “spiritual embryonic period” for the formation of individuals’ cultural identity and values. Implementing cultural immersion at this stage is an inevitable measure for fulfilling the requirement that the construction of spiritual civilization should “start with children,” and it is also a foundational project for forging a strong sense of community for the Chinese nation and passing on the cultural bloodline. Therefore, how to achieve the child-oriented and life-oriented transformation of traditional culture at the preschool stage has become an important issue that current preschool education research urgently needs to address.

However, the transformation of traditional culture should not be confined to overt activities such as classical recitation, festive celebrations, or traditional skill demonstrations; rather, it must be deeply rooted in the everyday lives of young children. As a daily life setting through which children interact, diet also embodies profound Chinese cultural genes, making food education a natural vehicle for transitioning traditional culture from “formal transmission” to “intrinsic integration.” At present, however, most food education practices remain limited to the imparting of nutritional knowledge or simple cooking activities—lacking hands-on experiential components, featuring limited content, and possessing insufficient cultural depth. There is therefore an urgent need to introduce educational resources with greater

cultural richness to enrich the spiritual core of food education ^[2].

The integration of tea culture is therefore timely. Chinese tea culture embodies the philosophical essence of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism, and its spiritual connotations of “clarity, mildness, tranquility, harmony, and authenticity” are highly consistent with the principles advocated by food education—gratitude to nature, reverence for life, healthy eating, and the nourishment of body and mind ^[2-3]. More valuably, the complete journey of tea from a fresh leaf to a cup of fragrant tea encompasses an embodied experiential chain that includes planting observation, harvesting labor, and cultural perception. This can not only compensate for the lack of process-based experience and cultural depth in current food education, but also, through practical segments such as learning tea etiquette and handling tea utensils, effectively cultivate young children’s sense of order, concentration, and aesthetic sensibility, thereby endowing food education with philosophical depth and humanistic warmth. On this basis, this study focuses on the pathways and strategies for integrating tea culture into early childhood food education, aiming to provide theoretical reference for the creative transformation of China’s fine traditional culture in preschool education and to offer feasible practical solutions for the construction of localized and distinctive food education curricula.

2. Current Research Status and Exploration of Early Childhood Food Education

2.1 Current Research Status of Early Childhood Food Education

In recent years, with changes in the national dietary structure and the increasing prominence of children’s nutritional and health problems, food education has gradually become a new hotspot in preschool education research. Preschool age is a sensitive period for the formation of taste and a critical period for the development of healthy behavioral habits. Food education not only helps young children understand food nutrition and develop healthy eating habits, but also performs multiple functions such as promoting sound personality development and transmitting fine culture ^[4]. Since Professor Li Lite introduced food education from Japan in 2006, food education research in China has gradually unfolded.

In terms of research content, existing studies have focused on three aspects: the value, construction, and implementation strategies of early childhood food education. At the value level, researchers generally believe that food education has multiple effects on young children, such as deepening cognition, nurturing emotions, transmitting culture, cultivating morality, promoting physical and mental health, and fostering aesthetic creativity ^[5]. At the construction level, some scholars have proposed that food education curricula should start from cultivating young children’s “food knowledge, food competence, and food sensibility,” incorporating knowledge about food itself, its growth, and its cultural connotations into the curriculum system. At the implementation level, kindergartens in various regions have carried out diverse explorations, such as constructing five-dimensional curriculum objectives of “food virtue, food wisdom, food health, food art, and food competence” with the three meals and four seasons as the main thread ^[6].

In practice, current kindergarten food education faces problems such as monotonous content, a lack of novelty in form, and underqualified teaching staff. Specifically in teaching activities, there are problems such as objectives neglecting emotion, content being repetitive and conventional, and implementation lacking systematicness. In addition, the scarcity of curriculum resources, insufficient teacher understanding, and parents’ lack of cooperative awareness also constrain the effectiveness of food education curriculum implementation ^[7].

2.2 Research Exploration on Integrating Traditional Culture into Early Childhood Food Education

Driven by the dual impetus of cultural inheritance and the concept of food education, researchers have begun to pay attention to the integration of traditional culture and early childhood food education. Related research has shown a growing trend over the past decade, and current explorations mainly focus on the following aspects.

First, the integration of traditional food culture. Traditional food culture carries rich historical connotations, and implementing traditional food culture education in kindergartens helps enhance young children’s sense of cultural identity. In practice, many kindergartens carry out food education activities in line with traditional festivals, such as

making dumplings on the Winter Solstice, eating tangyuan on the Lantern Festival, making zongzi on the Dragon Boat Festival, and eating mooncakes on the Mid-Autumn Festival, guiding children to experience the charm of traditional Chinese culture in the process of making and tasting festive foods^[5].

Second, the integration of the culture of the Twenty-Four Solar Terms. Researchers believe that eating according to the seasons and educating according to the seasons are the cultural essence of the Chinese nation. Some studies have constructed a four-season food education system based on the framework of “spring birth, summer growth, autumn harvest, and winter storage,” and proposed implementation strategies taking solar terms as the axis, food ingredients as the medium, and labor as the path^[8].

Third, the preliminary integration of tea culture and early childhood food education. Tea culture has multiple values for early childhood education. Integrating tea culture at this stage has positive significance for promoting children’s comprehensive physical and mental health development, advancing curriculum renewal, and transmitting fine traditional culture^[3]. Existing studies focus more on the argumentation of the necessity of integrating tea culture into preschool education and the analysis of application strategies. Thematic research on the deep integration of tea culture and early childhood food education is still in its infancy, and relevant achievements are very limited.

In summary, early childhood food education has made certain progress in curriculum construction and practical exploration, but further deepening is still needed in the excavation and systematic integration of cultural heritage. This provides a realistic basis and research opportunity for this study to explore new pathways for food education from the perspective of tea culture and to achieve the organic unity of cultural inheritance and food education enlightenment.

3. Pathways and Strategies for Integrating Tea Culture into Early Childhood Food Education

The integration of tea culture into early childhood food education should run through children’s interaction with nature, their dialogue with traditional culture, and their practice in daily life. Based on the framework of “natural experience—cultural immersion—life practice,” this study systematically constructs implementation pathways for integrating tea culture into early childhood food education from four dimensions: curriculum integration, practical experience, environment creation, and home–kindergarten collaboration. These four dimensions are mutually supportive: curriculum integration addresses the question of “how to teach,” practical experience addresses “how to learn,” environment creation addresses “where to learn,” and home-kindergarten collaboration addresses “how to sustain learning.”

3.1 Curriculum Integration: Organic Infusion of Tea Culture into the Five Domains

The curriculum is the main channel for implementing kindergarten education. Infusing tea culture into teaching activities across the five domains is a fundamental pathway for achieving the curricularization of tea culture food education. In the health domain, children are guided to understand the nutritional value of tea leaves and, through operational activities such as brewing and serving tea, to exercise fine motor skills and hand–eye coordination. In the language domain, materials such as tea culture picture books, tea poems and nursery rhymes, and tea stories are used to enrich children’s vocabulary and expressive ability. Teachers may also explain tea culture legends and allusions to children through self-made picture books, organically incorporating ideological and political elements into them. In the science domain, children are guided to observe the morphological changes of tea leaves in water and perceive differences in tea liquor color, thereby developing scientific inquiry abilities such as observation, comparison, and recording. In the art domain, children are guided to appreciate the beauty of tea utensil shapes, the beauty of tea liquor color, and the aesthetic mood of the tea setting, and to express themselves through painting, handicrafts, and other forms. In the social domain, with the help of tea culture etiquette norms, children are guided to learn social etiquette such as respectfully offering and serving tea, cultivating the character of respecting teachers and valuing virtue, and being modest and courteous.

In curriculum implementation, differentiated content should be designed according to children’s age characteristics: the junior class focuses mainly on sensory experience—smelling tea fragrance, observing tea color, and touching tea leaves; the middle class engages in simple tea-brewing experiences and recognition of tea utensils; the senior class is guided

to observe tea plant growth, explore tea-making processes, and learn nutritional knowledge, thus forming an integrated model of “tea culture and basic curriculum.”

3.2 Practical Experience: Full-Chain Activity Design for Tea Culture Food Education

Practical experience is the core segment of tea culture food education. Taking “perceiving nature—operational experience—cultural internalization” as its main thread, it aims to guide young children through a complete practical chain to achieve progressive advancement from sensory cognition to spiritual cultivation.

Kindergartens may use vacant spaces on campus to open a “little tea garden,” organizing children to participate in activities such as planting tea seedlings, watering, weeding, and observing growth, so as to perceive the changes of tea leaves from tender buds to mature leaves, understand the sources of food, and cultivate reverence for nature and life. Tea product making is the key link connecting planting and drinking. Children may be guided to participate in simple processing procedures such as tea picking, spreading for withering, rolling, and drying, or to make tea eggs, tea snacks, and other foods. Through weighing, proportioning, and observing color changes, children develop fine motor skills and initial scientific inquiry awareness in hands-on operations, while also experiencing the labor implication that “every bowl of porridge and every meal should remind one of how hard they are to come by.” Professionals may also be invited to demonstrate on site traditional tea-making or tea art techniques such as tea whisking and tea boiling. Cultural immersion runs through the entire process of practice. Teachers may organize children to participate in activities such as respectfully offering tea, tasting tea, and tea gatherings, experiencing the spiritual connotations of tea culture in ritualized experiences. The full-chain design enables food education to transcend mere knowledge transmission or skill training, becoming a comprehensive practical activity integrating labor education, life education, and cultural education.

3.3 Environmental Design: Three-Dimensional Design of the Tea Culture Experience Space

The environment is the “third teacher” for young children. Integrating tea culture into kindergarten environment creation can make tea culture a “living educational resource” that children can perceive, participate in, and converse with. This study creates a three-dimensional tea culture experience space from three levels: public areas, classroom spaces, and outdoor places.

At the public area level, a tea culture display area may be set up in the kindergarten hall or corridor, displaying tea leaf specimens, tea utensil models, pictures, and so on, to create a tea culture atmosphere. Kindergartens with the necessary conditions may establish a dedicated tea art function room equipped with tea utensils and tables and chairs suitable for children’s operation, providing a special place for children to encounter and learn about tea culture.

At the classroom space level, a tea art corner or “little tea house” may be set up in the activity room. It simulates the real situation of a tea room and is equipped with materials such as tea utensils and tea leaves, facilitating children’s autonomous tea-brewing experience during area activity time. Through daily area activities, tea culture experience extends from “formal curriculum” to “daily immersion.”

At the outdoor place level, a mini tea garden may be opened using the kindergarten’s green space, extending tea culture experience from indoors to the natural environment. The three levels complement one another: public areas create atmosphere, classroom spaces support operation, and outdoor places connect with nature, jointly forming a three-dimensional tea culture experience environment system.

3.4 Home–Kindergarten Collaboration: Establishing a Synergistic Mechanism for Tea Culture and Food Education

Home–kindergarten collaboration serves as a crucial safeguard for extending tea culture and food education from kindergarten to the family setting. This study adopts three key components—parental tea workshops, family tea practices, and home–school tea achievement exhibitions—as its framework to establish a collaborative education system, thereby transforming the home–school relationship from one-directional cooperation to bidirectional synergy.

Parental Tea Workshop Program aims to enhance parents’ understanding of tea culture and their willingness to participate. Kindergartens can disseminate knowledge about tea culture and its educational value through parent–teacher

meetings, thematic lectures, and posts on official WeChat accounts; they may also invite parents with expertise in tea studies to participate in these sessions, or organize parent salons to foster dialogue between families and kindergartens. Family tea practices encourage parents to extend tea culture and food education into their daily lives. Specific activities include: conducting joint tea culture-themed surveys with their children; taking young children to tea gardens on weekends to experience tea picking; brewing and tasting tea together at home; and participating in parent-child tea gatherings. For example, in the “Parent-Child Joint Brewing of Three Types of Flower Tea” activity, parents and children divide tasks and collaborate, collectively appreciating the charm of tea culture amidst the drifting aroma of tea, thereby extending this cultural immersion from the kindergarten to the home.

The Home-School Tea Culture Achievement Exhibition serves as a platform for showcasing and providing feedback for collaborative child development. Kindergartens may regularly host such exhibitions to display the tea art skills acquired by children, their creations related to tea culture, and the outcomes of their family-based practices. This not only provides recognition and encouragement for the children but also offers parents an opportunity to exchange experiences and share feedback.

4. Conclusion

The integration of tea culture into early childhood food education is not only an active exploration of pathways for transmitting China’s fine traditional culture but also injects richer cultural substance into the practice of early childhood food education. This study proposes a three-dimensional framework of “natural experience—cultural immersion—life practice,” and constructs implementation pathways from four dimensions: curriculum integration, practical experience, environment creation, and home–kindergarten collaboration. While respecting young children’s life experience and cognitive levels, it transforms the spiritual connotations of tea culture into activity forms that can be perceived, experienced, and internalized, helping children develop healthy dietary habits, lucid sensory experiences, and focused, grateful dispositions. In this way, it sows the seeds of cultural identity at the beginning of life, enabling children to perceive the gentleness and profundity of Chinese civilization amid the lingering fragrance of tea, to develop a love for and pride in China’s fine traditional culture, and to allow cultural confidence and a sense of cultural belonging to take root in their childhood taste buds and deep within their hearts.

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