

The role of picture books in facilitating moral education in Chinese kindergartens: a literature review

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Abstract. (1) Background: To explore the roles of picture books in Chinese kindergartens' moral education and teachers' implementation challenges, noting Chinese picture books' cultural specificity themed on traditional festivals, history, patriotism and familial bonds, and that teachers select picture books by cultural connotations, educational orientations, children's age and moral goals and adopt methods like questioning and role-playing; (2) Methods: literature review; (3) Results: picture books serve as vital moral education carriers, helping children grasp abstract moral concepts, stimulating empathy and promoting moral cognition-to-behaviour transformation; teachers face challenges including random book selection, insufficient moral connotation interpretation ability and neglected picture book-based moral education due to parental academic focus; (4) Conclusions: this research underscores picture books' values in kindergarten moral education and discusses strategies to address teachers' implementation dilemmas.

Keywords: picture books, moral education, early education, chinese kindergartens

1. Introduction

A picture book is a form of book that narrates through the integration of images and text, whose core resides in constructing a complete meaning via the interplay between visual and textual elements. Images not only complement the text but also independently convey emotions and connotations through color, composition, and visual symbol, embodying a synergistic relationship where both components contribute to the holistic narrative experience [1-3]. Within the educational domain, picture books exhibit multi-dimensional and significant functions. By incorporating captivating narratives and diverse artistic expressions, picture books engage children, stimulate their imagination and colour perception, and foster foundational literacy skills, including reading and writing [4-6].

Moral education for young children is of paramount importance for shaping their character, cultivating moral responsibility and correct values, and assisting them in becoming citizens who meet social standards. Early childhood is a critical period for shaping moral behaviours, encompassing three dimensions: cognition, affect, and behaviour [7]. Picture books employ narrative strategies such as situational concretization and role modeling to facilitate young children's emotional cognition and understanding, cultivate their empathy and sense of social justice, and thereby promote the comprehensive development of their moral competence [8-10]. By means of moral storytelling, role modeling, and other approaches, picture books evoke young children's

emotional resonance, ultimately helping them enact moral behaviours in daily life and grow into moral citizens who conform to social norms [11].

In China, Guidelines for Kindergarten Education (for Trial Implementation) and Early Learning and Development Guidelines for Children Aged 3 to 6 Years clearly define kindergarten moral education goals, with the social domain as the core and permeation into multiple educational domains [12-13]. A picture book serves as a book form characterized by co-narration through images and text, coupled with diverse educational functions, which not only facilitates the development of young children's literacy skills, fosters their aesthetic perception and creativity, and ignites the initiation of their mathematical thinking, but also notably holds indispensable significance in moral education that cannot be marginalized [6, 14-16]. Despite being widely used in Chinese kindergartens, a comprehensive system adapted to local needs has not yet been established, and teachers face practical difficulties when using picture books for moral education. Therefore, through a literature review, this study focuses on two main research questions: What specific roles do picture books play in moral education in Chinese kindergartens, and what challenges do teachers encounter when utilizing picture books for moral education? This study aims to systematically synthesize existing research, highlight the significance of picture books in moral education, and provide practical insights for enhancing their effectiveness in early childhood educational settings.

2. Literature Review

2.1. The Roles of Picture Books in Moral Education

Within the context of kindergarten settings, a picture book serves as a vital vehicle for moral education, whose impacts on young children's moral development have garnered widespread attention within the academic community [11, 17-19]. To start with, in terms of helping children understand moral concepts, picture books effectively assist children in grasping abstract moral concepts through the combination of intuitive presentation and teacher guidance [16]. Hsiao & Shih conducted an empirical study with 11 5-6-year-old children in Taiwan, and the results indicated that teachers effectively used picture books to vividly depict the specific consequences of environmental damage. By integrating these visual presentations with model behaviours, the study demonstrated how children could connect the abstract concept of environmental protection with concrete scenarios, ultimately gaining a clear understanding of its meaning and significance. Wild, through a 2-year design-based qualitative research, found that introducing social justice picture books featuring diverse roles such as refugees and ethnic minorities into preschool education programs helped 3-5-year-old children understand abstract concepts such as identity, diversity inclusion, and social justice, and even enabled them to actively express opinions on unfair behaviours like racial discrimination.

Meanwhile, by presenting specific scenarios and character emotions, picture books contribute to fostering children's emotions such as compassion and kindness [20-21]. Seidel & Rokne pointed out in their research [21] that teachers stimulated children's empathy for war victims by using picture books to present specific scenarios of harm caused by war. This practice helps guide children to translate their cognition of peace into practical actions to safeguard peace, such as participating in writing letters to politicians and designing fundraising activities.

Furthermore, a study conducted by Akyol [20] with 20 5-year-old young children showed that the depiction of friendly cooperative interactions between characters in picture books helped evoke young children's identification with prosocial behaviours, including empathic recognition of kind deeds, empathic sensitivity to others' needs, and emotional resonance with the positive experiences brought by cooperation. These emotional resonances lay an important foundation for the subsequent development of moral behaviours, prompting

young children to exhibit behaviours consistent with the values of care and tolerance, such as actively helping peers, politely expressing needs and gratitude, and collaborating with peers to complete tasks.

2.2. Implementing Moral Education Through Picture Books in Kindergarten Settings

In kindergarten settings, the implementation pathways for teachers to utilize picture books in moral education demonstrate notable diversity. In a quasi-experimental study involving twenty 5-year-olds, Akyol [20] detailed a process where teachers first employed a "values checklist" to select appropriate picture books. Subsequently, through interactive reading sessions, they guided children to observe character behaviours, aiding their comprehension of moral values such as love and tolerance. Finally, open-ended questions, like "If you were the character in the story, how would you help your friend?", were used to stimulate children's thinking, facilitating the translation of values understood from the books into concrete behavioural expressions. In a study focusing on seven children aged 5-6, Balakrishnan & Thambu observed teachers directing attention to specific illustrative scenes, such as "interactions among dinosaur friends". Connecting these narratives to children's life experiences, teachers organised small-group discussions, allowing children to autonomously identify manifestations of "love and care", while rhythmic language and suspenseful plot elements were incorporated to enhance engagement [22]. Retnowati, Salim & Saleh conducted a study with 31 5-6-year-old children, implementing 20-minute daily dialogic reading in small groups of 4-6 children. They selected picture books featuring animal characters and life-related plots, and introduced a "Kindness Tree", where children received cards to post for displaying kind behaviours, and observation sheets to record children's daily practice of moral behaviours [23].

In Chinese kindergarten educational settings, picture books are highly integrated with Chinese cultural elements and serve as important carriers for conveying cultural values and moral concepts [24-26]. Li's research highlighted the significant role of picture books themed around Chinese festivals. For example, Guo Nian La! (Celebrate the Chinese New Year!) restored traditions such as pasting Spring Festival couplets and making dumplings, allowing children to intuitively perceive the cultural connotations of traditional Chinese festivals. Additionally, the study emphasized the educational values of picture books based on Chinese historical stories. Taking Cheng Men Li Xue (Standing in the Snow at Cheng's Gate) as an example, the picture book conveyed respect for teachers by depicting scenes where students wait respectfully in the snow for their teacher to wake up naturally instead of knocking to disturb. Through narrative scenario interpretation, such picture books concretize the abstract concept of respecting teachers, providing children with imitable behavioural models and thus subtly promoting their understanding and identification of the connotation of respecting teachers. Meanwhile, Liu's research demonstrated the wide application of picture books themed around patriotism and family love in Chinese early childhood moral education. Such picture books helped children establish national identity by depicting images of child heroes defending the motherland during wars. Ma's research indicated that within Chinese kindergarten educational contexts, red story picture books which seamlessly integrate red culture and revolutionary spirits serve as a pivotal vehicle for conveying patriotic values and nurturing the moral concept of a sense of responsibility among young children.

2.3. The Current Status of Kindergarten Teachers' Use of Picture Books for Moral Education

In the context of Chinese preschool education practice, picture books have increasingly become a crucial medium for young children's moral education. Current research demonstrated that kindergarten teachers took into account the alignment between young children's age characteristics and moral education objectives when selecting picture books, adjusting the complexity of such books in light of the cognitive levels and language comprehension abilities of children across different age groups [25, 28]. For instance, in the studies conducted

by Liu and Li, kindergarten teachers selected picture books with short narrative structures featuring a single plot twist for 4- to 5-year-old children, whereas for 5- to 6-year-olds, they often adopted picture books with complete narratives and coherent plots to foster the development of coherent comprehension and moral reasoning.

At the level of teaching implementation, teachers often deepened children's understanding of moral concepts through heuristic questions. For example, by presenting the image changes of "wheat field—flour—bread", teachers guided young children to recognize the hardships of food production and the value of labour, thereby fostering a sense of gratitude. Meanwhile, teachers often integrated multi-modal teaching methods such as role-playing, listening to music, painting, or watching videos, guiding young children to experience moral situations by imitating the words and deeds of characters in picture books, and emotionally forming emotional resonance with qualities such as kindness, gratitude, and responsibility [28-29].

At the level of the externalization and transfer of moral behaviour, researchers also found that picture book teaching could promote young children's transformation of moral cognition into specific actions [27, 30]. Liu pointed out that by integrating picture books themed around "sharing" with young children's daily lives and immediately organizing toy-sharing activities after reading, teachers could effectively help young children internalize the concept of "sharing" into real behaviours.

3. Discussion

Based on a review of the literature, this study systematically examines the current state of practice regarding picture book-based moral education in Chinese kindergartens. It identifies multiple, interrelated practical predicaments within the current implementation process that collectively constrain the effective realization of moral education objectives. It is necessary to analyze the root causes from a practical logic perspective and propose optimization strategies. In the domain of picture book-based moral education in Chinese kindergartens, significant multifaceted challenges persist. First, picture book selection serves as the prerequisite step for implementing moral education. However, research finds a high degree of arbitrariness in teachers' selection processes, characterized by a lack of systematic selection criteria and a clear moral education orientation. Although existing research confirms the decisive role of age-appropriate content for moral education outcomes [25, 28], this study found that kindergarten teachers' selection behaviours are predominantly experience-driven. Teachers often rely on personal teaching experience or the market popularity of books, with their understanding of age-appropriateness frequently limited to superficial dimensions like illustration complexity. This approach lacks a nuanced judgement regarding the alignment between the moral cognitive development patterns of children across different age groups and the moral themes present in the books. Such selection bias directly leads to a disconnect between the book content and the goals of "life-oriented, contextualized moral education" outlined in official guidelines like Guidelines for Kindergarten Education (for Trial Implementation) and Early Learning and Development Guidelines for Children Aged 3 to 6 Years, thereby weakening the targeted effectiveness of the moral instruction."

Second, the study identifies significant shortcomings in teachers' depth of interpretation regarding the moral connotation of picture books and their capacity to translate these insights into practice. Wang's empirical research demonstrated this issue using classic moral education books like The Rainbow-coloured Flower; though kindergarten teachers are capable of guiding young children to acknowledge others' efforts on their behalf through the design of targeted questions, they generally lack guidance that connects the inherent moral values of this act to young children's daily life experiences. During interpretation, teachers often remained at the level of having children identify surface-level plot points, failing to use advanced questions

like "What have you shared in your life?" or "How did you feel when you shared?" to bridge the narrative and real-life experiences. Consequently, children struggle to internalize the moral concepts from the books into their own behavioural codes.

Furthermore, a scientific evaluation system is the core support for assessing moral education effectiveness and optimizing practical strategies [26, 31]. However, current evaluation practices for picture book-based moral education are characterized by a significant overemphasis on form, which substantially diminishes their practical impact. Hou points out that records of children's moral behaviours often rely on simplistic feedback, lacking a scientific tracking and evaluation system [32]. Chan's research further indicates that parents in Hong Kong, influenced by academic competition, hold high expectations for their children's academic achievement. To cater to parental expectations and maintain enrollment competitiveness, kindergartens heavily prioritize knowledge acquisition, such as intensifying instruction in language and mathematics, while marginalizing moral education [33]. Notably, Chan's analysis of the Hong Kong preschool curriculum guide revealed that its moral education goals are vague and lack operational specificity, such as the absence of a concrete list of core values and corresponding behavioural standards tailored to preschoolers' cognitive characteristics. This deficiency, combined with parental academic orientation, makes picture book-based moral education more susceptible to neglect, further impeding its effective implementation.

These issues collectively reflect the practical dilemmas currently faced in picture book-based moral education in Chinese kindergartens. Multiple studies [25, 29, 30, 32] consistently identify the insufficiency of teachers' professional competence as a key factor constraining the effectiveness of picture book moral education, particularly in the areas of book selection and instructional implementation, highlighting an urgent need for systematic professional training. Therefore, it is necessary to provide teachers with professional support to improve their practice in areas such as moral education orientation, teaching strategies, and evaluation systems, thereby enhancing the overall effectiveness of picture book-based moral education.

4. Conclusion

This study effectively addresses two research questions through a synthesis of existing literature. On the one hand, it elucidates the role of picture books in kindergarten moral education, including helping young children comprehend abstract moral concepts, evoking positive affections such as empathy, and promoting the practice of moral behaviours. On the other hand, this study reveals the primary challenges faced by Chinese kindergartens in implementing moral education using picture books. These challenges encompass the arbitrariness in book selection, the lack of depth in moral explanation and the absence of an evaluation system, as well as insufficient emphasis on moral education at societal and parental levels. Specifically, teachers often rely on personal experience when selecting books, lacking systematic criteria for age-appropriateness and moral education orientation. During instruction, teaching often remains at the level of superficial questioning about characters' behaviours, failing to establish effective connections with children's daily lives and cultural context. Concurrently, current moral education assessments mostly remain at the level of qualitative observation, lacking systematic and operable tracking evaluation tools. More importantly, parents generally focus their educational priorities on cognitive development and academic achievement, paying insufficient attention to the moral education potential of picture books, thereby undermining the effectiveness of home-kindergarten collaboration in moral education.

In summary, this study not only synthesizes the instructional values and practical dilemmas of using picture books in moral education but also provides directional guidance for future policy formulation and practical improvement. To enhance the systematicity and professionalism of applying picture books in early childhood

moral education, it is recommended to strengthen support in the following three areas: Firstly, a systematic training framework for teachers should be established, enabling them to master principles based on age characteristics and moral education objectives. Secondly, professional development programmes should place greater emphasis on instructional strategies for moral education through picture books. This includes equipping teachers with the skills to employ methods such as guided questioning, scenario-based teaching, role-playing, and extended learning to real-life contexts with flexibility and creativity. Third, there is a pressing need to develop scientifically grounded evaluation tools for moral education, which would support teachers in conducting multi-dimensional assessments through systematic behavioural observations. Furthermore, in-depth research should be conducted on the comprehension characteristics of children across different age groups regarding picture book content and moral themes, aiming to construct a resource system for picture book-based moral education that aligns with the local cultural context, thereby achieving the localization, systematization, and high-quality development of picture books in early childhood moral education.

5. References

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