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Best practices of teaching traditional beliefs using Korean folk literature

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Abstract

This paper describes unique traditional values teachers strive to instil in the minds of children in preschools in South Korea. Also, it discusses the importance of teaching values during early childhood as they reflect the thoughts that have guided the lives of Korean people for thousands of years, and are still applicable in modern day Korea. In addition, it explores effective practices of teaching traditional beliefs using folk literature which stimulates the interest of preschool students.

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Keywords: Folk literature, Teaching traditional beliefs, Early Childhood Education, South Korea

1. Introduction

Educators have become concerned about preschoolers in Korea who seem to prefer reading about Disney's movie characters to traditional folk literature. Especially since the learning of English and globalization have become critical parts of Korean early childhood education, teachers and parents use popular books, songs, movies, and websites published in the United States to teach English. These American teaching materials contain beliefs and behavior generally acceptable in western culture. However, they are often in conflict with Korean traditional teachings. Researchers (Cromdal, 2004; Cummins, 1991; Iannacci, 2008) suggest that when preschool children devote a significant amount of time and effort to learning English, they learn not only the foreign language but also new cultural beliefs and ways of life. For example, when children learn to say, "hello" to their teacher in English, they also grasp the accompanying action of waving their hand. This is considered inappropriate in Korean society where children are expected to bow their head when greeting their teachers.

When children read stories and watch media programs created for students in the United States, they are exposed to westernized beliefs which tend to affect their behavior. If these trends continue, educators predict that Korea's traditional values will gradually disappear and Korea will lose many of its authentic traditional beliefs. In response, Korean early childhood education programs have stressed preserving Korean heritage that is being lost with an emphasis on globalization of the nation and an influx of a westernized educational and social environment. Teachers believe that the teaching of traditional beliefs using folk literature will act as a levy, preventing the erosion of Korean culture by the powerful wave of western cultural influences. This paper describes unique Korean values teachers strive to instill in the minds of children with the use of folk literature, discusses the importance of teaching values during early childhood, explores effective teaching practices of using folk literature to stimulate student's interest in preschools and kindergartens, and ends with closing remarks.

2. Instilling Traditional Values Using Folk Literature

Folk Literature is highly instructive and can therefore be well utilized for children's value education. It contains useful lessons to help young children grow into moral and responsible adults, capable of making sound judgments. Folk tales usually conclude with rewards for virtuous characters who have exhibited traditional values. Reading traditional folk literature allows children to experience an emotional catharsis and internalize social values through personal connections made with characters. Folk literature can inspire children with morality and help them develop into well-rounded members of society. Thus, Korean educators believe the use of folk literature is a culturally and developmentally appropriate method of teaching values which reflects the thoughts that have guided the lives of Korean people for thousands of years.

Yoon (2005) analyzed 100 Korean traditional folk tales used in preschools to instill Korean values. Each story contained three distinct virtues useful in guiding children's development and daily lives: (1) Possession of good moral values, such as filial piety (dutiful for the parents), friendship, and brotherliness; (2) Respect for wisdom; and (3) Encouragement of good deeds and punishment of evil. Filial piety is defined as, a love and respect for one's parents and ancestors, and is one of the most important virtues Korea tries to cultivate in children (Jo, 2007). Louie (2005) agreed with Yoon and also emphasized that these three fundamental values that teachers try to instill are dominant in Korean traditional children's literature. By reading folk literature, children learn that individual merit and worth are largely determined by a person's actions and ability to demonstrate these values (You, 2003). These ideal values are more important than ever to possess as Korea has become a fast developing, highly technical and capitalistic country. Furthermore, as the world becomes more globalized, positive values presented in Korean folk literature are pertinent not only to Korean children, but to children everywhere.

3. Importance of Teaching Values during Early Childhood

The industrialized and highly technological modern Korea is in danger of losing its traditional values which stem from Confucianism. Confucianism has been the dominant force shaping Korean cultural values and social structures through history, and continues to have a profound effect on Korean's daily lives (Eber, 1986; Park & Cho, 1995). Korean traditional values place an emphasis on developing good moral values, respecting authority, and doing good deeds. These values are often considered outdated in Korea by the influence of the western thought. Western influence comes primarily from the United States' presence in Korea which began following WWII and the Korean War. The Korean government's focus has been on promoting globalization with a national policy of emphasizing English language education. For example, the tradition of respecting teachers and caring for elderly parents is disappearing due to the influence of individualism. Also, winning a competition among one's peers is promoted over collaboration with others in school and the community.

To avoid losing traditions, Korean educators and parents alike try to teach Korean values early, before children are influenced by western culture. Prior to sending children to preschool, parents take the responsibility to teach children to use kind words, good manners, respect their elders, and consider the needs of others. When such traditional beliefs are taught early, they will be less likely to disappear as society becomes more modern and industrialized. With a solid understanding of their unique societal values, Koreans can embrace new cultures while keeping their underlying traditions and cultural beliefs intact (Kim, 1998). Korea's human virtue which stems from the social principles of Korea's traditions and customs, should continuously passed down for generations to preschool age children. The tradition of instilling traditional beliefs in children is still applicable in modern day Korea, and development of good character is viewed as an essential part of the current early childhood educational curriculum. Korea's national preschool curriculum, therefore, reflects the country's unique traditional characteristics because educators and policy makers believe strongly that the traditional values used to raise children in the home should be replicated in the preschool settings.

The latest revision of the preschool curriculum at the national level was first implemented in 2007 and emphasizes teaching Korea's traditional culture and promotes respect and love of heritage. The 7th preschool curriculum consists of five life areas: physical, social, expressive, language, and inquiry development. The five specific objectives of the curriculum are; (1) to help young children develop harmonious minds and bodies and acquire basic living habits; (2) to acquire skills for living together and love of traditional culture; (3) to enable young children to express their own thoughts and feelings in creative ways; (4) to develop language skills for communication and proper language use; (5) to explore the environment with curiosity and respect for nature (Moon, Kim, Na, Yang, Lee, & Lim, 2007).

Preschool is the optimal time to begin teaching traditional values as children develop the concept of self, and build identity, through wider social interaction. In preschool, children can meet the objective of the preschool curriculum, which is to foster pride and love for their traditional culture and country using the traditional literature integrated in varied methods of instruction. This is explored in the following section.

4. Effective Practices of Using Folk Literature in Preschools

Early childhood educators believe the use of folk literature is an effective way to teach traditional values because it reflects the lives that have guided Korean families for hundreds of years. Folk literature contains unique lessons to help children become righteous individuals, capable of making sound moral judgments; still extremely important in Korean society. Folk literature is widely available and aids in children's exposure to Korea's rich culture, it is also age appropriate material for children because of its moral teachings and lessons (Jung, 2002; Jung 2009; Spagnoli, 1995). Reading folktales helps children understand the way people have thought, felt, believed, and behaved for generations because values and beliefs that have guided ordinary people's lives for centuries are portrayed. Parents wish to pass these values down to their children (Grayson, 2006; Lamme, Krogh, & Yachmetz, 1992; Lee, 2001; Lee, Bang, & Park., 1992; Lee, Chung, & Lee, 1974; Lee, & et al, 1989; Moon, 2009; Oh & Kim, 2007).

This section explores effective practices of using folk literature in preschools. Teachers engage children in a variety of interesting methods of instruction, such as, reading and reflective thinking, discussion, comparing similar folktales, oral narration, dramatization, multimedia instruction, drawing, and writing through which children can express their feelings and thoughts (Boo, 2006; In & Lee, 2004; Park, 2002).

4.1. Reading and Reflective Thinking Discussion

Preschool children read popular folk literature, such as *Faerie and Woodcutter* (Eu, 1988; Lee, 1990), *Kongi Patgi* (Song, 2009), *Hungbu and Nolbu* (Eu, 1999; Lee, J. Y., 1990; Lee, S. R., 1990), *Sim Chung* (Choi, 2005; Lee, 2006), *Green Frog* (Lee, 2007), *The Sun and the Moon* (Eu, 1988; Kang, 1994; Kim, 1990; Lee, 1987; Lee & Son, 1990), and *Golden Ax and Silver Ax* (Kim, 2003; Lee, 1997), which contain traditional values. These folk tales reward virtuous characters that demonstrate respect for elders, wisdom, and good deeds (Jung, 2009). After reading, the children discuss the consequences of actions in the story and reflect on their own actions and behavior. Folk literature is extremely beneficial when children are allowed to think and reflect on what they have read (Choi & Kim, 1988).

4.2. Comparing Similar Folk Tales

Children can read two similar folk tales and compare and contrast the two with respect to character traits, settings, problems, solutions, and main ideas. Folk tales are available in various versions due to new authors using their own ideas and wit to create plots that children can easily read and understand. For example, children read slightly different versions of *The Sun and The Moon*. Using folk literature with several alternative versions is an effective way to engage children in thinking and reflecting upon the similarities and differences in titles, characters, plots, and styles. For example, children can consider whether the characters have changed in the two stories and if the plots differ.

4.3. Oral Narration

After reading and listening to a folk tale, children can narrate it, which helps them remember the content of the stories and has a positive effect on their imagination, social interactions, and empathy with people in their life; the goal of Korean folk literature. During oral narration activity, children organize the events in a logical order to clearly convey the ideas to listeners. This requires them to think more deeply about what they have learned. Children also use a variety of voices, facial expressions, and gestures to enhance the effect of oral narration which improves children's expressive language skills, visualization, and creative thinking skills (Stadler & Ward, 2005).

4.4. Dramatization

Folk tales can be easily dramatized using improvisation and a variety of hand puppets made by children. Dramatization increases children's interest in reading and provides the opportunity for them to practice their speaking and listening skills while involving them in dialoguing with other children. Children not only appreciate a folk tale but also learn the moral expectations of society more easily when acting out characters and events in the story.

4.5. Multimedia Activities

Folk literature accompanies audiotapes and videotapes which can be useful resources for children. They can either listen to a narrated tale or watch a cartoon or movie. Children can also produce their own multimedia materials describing a folk tale, create a song and perform it, or sing a traditional folk song based on the story.

4.6. Responding with Drawing and Writing

Children can express their ideas about a folk tale via art and writing activities. They can draw and write about virtuous behavior that is rewarded in the story. Children can make their own interpretations of the story and characters they have read about. They can also draw or write comparisons of how people in the traditional folk tales live differently from themselves.

5. Closing Remarks

Folk tales are filled with lessons describing values, wisdom, and good deeds that are inherited from Korean ancestors. They inspire children with morality, which promotes righteous deeds essential for their successful moral and social development. Using folk literature which contains rich educational cultural elements, parents and teachers of children who live in a nation with rich culture and history should support their inheriting deeply rooted traditional values and becoming global citizens. Utilization of folk literature in a variety of instructional activities can facilitate children's reading and language development, build strong identity, foster morality, and promote the embracing of traditional values, thus ensuring the continuation of their rich heritage and global connections.

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