



The Unique Value and Application of Local Cultural Stories in Early Literacy Education for Young Children

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Abstract: Local cultural stories hold a unique position in early childhood literacy education. This qualitative study aims to explore the value of local cultural stories in early childhood literacy education through in - depth interviews with four respondents from different backgrounds. The analysis results show that local cultural stories can effectively improve children's language skills, enrich their vocabulary, and enhance the accuracy and fluency of their expressions. They can also deepen children's understanding of local culture and help them comprehend the connotations behind the culture. Moreover, these stories can stimulate children's thinking and creativity, enabling them to demonstrate unique innovative thinking in literacy activities. Additionally, they can cultivate children's reading interest and improve their reading concentration and initiative. Overall, local cultural stories enrich the learning experience of early childhood literacy education, broaden children's knowledge horizons, and are of great significance for improving children's comprehensive qualities. This study indicates that local cultural stories should be actively integrated into early childhood literacy education to promote the all - round development of children.

Keywords: Local cultural stories; early childhood literacy; language ability; cultural cognition; thinking and creativity; reading interest

1. Introduction

In the early childhood education system, literacy education is a crucial part of shaping children's cognitive abilities and cultivating their comprehensive qualities. It has a profound impact on children's future academic achievements and lifelong learning (Wildova & Kropáčková, 2015). As a vivid form of regional culture, local cultural stories carry rich historical memories, unique social customs, and profound humanistic spirits, playing an irreplaceable role in early childhood literacy education. Numerous previous studies have shown that children are more likely to be interested in learning in familiar cultural contexts (Gutiérrez & Rogoff, 2003). The cultural atmosphere created by local cultural stories can attract children's attention and serve as an important bridge connecting children with local culture. It stimulates children's enthusiasm for exploring literacy, provides a rich and suitable environment for the development of children's early literacy skills, and effectively promotes the coordinated progress of early childhood education in cultural inheritance and language development (Puspitasari & Ni'mah, 2024).

This study aims to deeply explore the multiple values of local cultural stories in early childhood literacy education. Firstly, it comprehensively explores the impact dimensions of these stories on early childhood literacy education and clarifies their potential roles in various aspects of children's growth. Secondly, from the perspectives of educators, parents, and other relevant parties, it analyzes the application status of local cultural stories in early literacy education, sorts out the experiences and difficulties, and analyzes the reasons. Thirdly, based on the research findings, it puts forward targeted strategies to promote the in - depth integration of early childhood literacy education and local cultural stories, and optimize educational practices.

2. Literature Review

In the early childhood education system, early literacy education is an important cornerstone for shaping children's cognitive abilities and cultivating their comprehensive qualities, having a far-reaching impact on their future academic achievements and lifelong learning (Snow, 2017). Local cultural stories, as vivid carriers of regional culture, carry rich historical memories, unique social customs, and profound humanistic spirits, occupying an important position in the field of early childhood literacy education (Wang & Hou, 2021; Smith, 2021).

Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory points out that language learning is essentially the product of the interaction between social interaction and the cultural environment. As an important part of the cultural environment, local cultural stories provide children with real and meaningful language practice scenarios, strongly promoting the development of their language abilities. Chen's (2025) research found that integrating local culture into early childhood education can significantly improve children's language expression and understanding abilities, and at the same time enhance their cultural awareness. In ethnic minority areas, Zheng & Guo (2024) practical observations show that teaching activities based on ethnic minority cultural stories not only promote the inheritance and development of ethnic minority language cultures among young children but also greatly stimulate children's learning enthusiasm, interest, and creativity.

Beck et al. (2002) pointed out that cultural background knowledge helps children understand and interpret texts. When children are exposed to stories related to their own culture, they can better understand the story content based on their existing life experiences, accumulate vocabulary, get familiar with grammatical structures, and master language expression skills during the reading process, thus laying a solid foundation for the improvement of their literacy skills. In addition, the cultural values and moral concepts such as cooperation, friendliness, and courage contained in local cultural stories can subtly shape children's personalities and values, promoting their social-emotional development and further highlighting the multiple values of local cultural stories in early childhood education (Derman-Sparks et al., 2020).

These studies fully demonstrate the positive role of local cultural stories in early childhood literacy education. However, upon in-depth examination of relevant research, it can be found that there are still some deficiencies. First, previous studies mostly focused on the impact of local cultural stories on a single dimension of children's literacy abilities, such as only paying attention to promoting reading interest or creativity, lacking a systematic review of their application methods and multiple values in early childhood literacy education (Zhang et al., 2024; Chen, 2025). Second, existing studies mostly used theoretical analysis or single-group research methods, lacking in-depth insights from multiple perspectives such as educators and parents on the practical application of stories, resulting in insufficient understanding of key information such as the actual application scenarios and effect feedback of local cultural stories in early literacy education (Yang & Li, 2019; Zhao, 2013).

Based on the above-mentioned research deficiencies, this study focuses on systematically combing the application values of local cultural stories in early childhood literacy education. Through in-depth interviews with different background groups, it analyzes the current situation and potential values of the application of stories, aiming to provide new perspectives for the theoretical development of this field, offer important references for subsequent exploration of scientific practice paths, and facilitate the in-depth integration of early childhood literacy education and local cultural stories.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research method, using interviews as the main data-collection means and applying qualitative content analysis method to deeply process the collected data (Schreier, 2012). Through in-depth interviews with respondents, rich qualitative data are obtained to explore the value of local cultural stories in early childhood literacy education from multiple perspectives. This study selects four representative respondents from different backgrounds, who can provide rich information from multiple perspectives, practicing early childhood education in Shandong Province, China. The specific information is shown in the Table 1.

Before the formal interviews, pre-teaching practice was carried out starting from September 2024. RA1 and RA2 respectively tried to integrate local cultural stories into literacy teaching in their classes. RA1 selected suitable stories based on experience and guided children to participate through story-telling, role-playing, and other methods; RA2 created vivid story scenarios with the help of multimedia resources. RB2 actively cooperated at home, reading storybooks with the child and carrying out parent-child interactions. RB1 provided theoretical guidance and observation as an expert. During the nearly five-month practice, teachers and parents continuously paid attention to children's performance in various activities. They observed children's states during activities such as listening to stories, telling stories, reading picture books, and writing simple symbols, including their concentration and participation enthusiasm; paid attention to children's language use in daily communication, such as vocabulary and expression fluency; noticed children's reactions to surrounding cultural elements, whether they were curious about local cultural phenomena and asked questions; and observed children's creative behaviors in free activities, such as their creative expressions when building blocks or painting. These observed situations were recorded in detail to provide rich background information for subsequent interviews.

Comprehensive and in-depth interviews were conducted with the four respondents around key issues such as the application methods of local cultural stories in early childhood literacy education, the changes of children after exposure

to the stories, and the difficulties and suggestions during the implementation process. The interview questions were carefully designed to cover story selection criteria, teaching interaction forms, changes in children's various abilities, and other contents. The interviews were recorded in full and immediately transcribed verbatim after the end to ensure the integrity and accuracy of the information.

Table 1. Information of the Respondents

Respondent Code	Identity	Years of Work/Involvement in Early Childhood Education	Relevant Experience or Advantages for the Research Topic
RA1	Senior Early Childhood Language Teacher	30 years	Long - term engagement in early childhood language education, familiar with the laws of children's language development, and has rich teaching practice experience
RA2	Young Early Childhood Teacher	5 years	Innovative in teaching, actively exploring new teaching models, and can bring novel teaching viewpoints and practical experiences
RB1	Education Expert	Focused on the research of the integration of children's culture and education for many years	Has profound professional theoretical knowledge and can provide unique insights from a professional perspective
RB2	Parent Volunteer	Deeply involved in early childhood education, attaches great importance to cultural inheritance, and pays close attention to children's growth	Can provide insights from the perspective of family education and reflect the situation of family cultural education

continued

This article uses the qualitative content analysis method (Schreier, 2012) to analyze the data. This method consists of 8 steps, as follows: 1) Select materials: Determine the interview transcripts of the 4 respondents as the analysis materials, which revolve around the key research questions; 2) Construct a coding framework: Set up theme categories and sub - categories around the impact of stories on children's language, cultural cognition, etc., and implementation issues; 3) Divide coding units: Split the interview text into units such as sentences and paragraphs according to meaning. 4. Test the coding framework: Try coding with some texts, check, and adjust the framework problems; 5) Evaluate and modify the coding framework: Based on the test results, clarify the attribution of ambiguous codes and optimize the framework; 6) Main analysis - code all materials: Code all texts with the determined framework; 7) Check the coding process: Invite a second coder to check some codes and ask experts to evaluate to ensure accuracy; and 8) Interpret and present the results: Analyze the codes to draw conclusions, such as changes in children in various aspects, and present them with examples and tables. An example of the analysis is shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Content Analysis

Theme	Category	Sub-category	Code	Example Sentence	Original Interview Content
Language ability improvement	Vocabulary expansion	Addition of local cultural feature words	Vocabulary feature increase	After listening to the Dragon Boat Festival story, children learned words such as "dragon boat racing" and "the fragrance of zongzi leaves"	RA1: "After listening to the Dragon Boat Festival story, children not only knew these words but also could use them in appropriate contexts."

Language ability improvement	Improved accuracy of vocabulary use	Precise description of scenes and emotions	Vocabulary use precision	When describing the Spring Festival, they would say, "The whole family sits around, chatting and laughing, and jointly welcomes the new year. Everywhere is filled with a strong flavor of the Spring Festival."	RA1: "Now children describe the Spring Festival with accurate and vivid words."
					<i>continued</i>
Cultural cognition deepening	Deeper understanding of historical origins	Knowing the detailed process and significance of historical events	History understanding deepening	They can clearly tell that their hometown was founded in the Ming Dynasty, developed due to transportation and resources, and understand its significance	RB1: "Now children know the history of their hometown in great detail and can also explain why these events are important"
Cultural cognition deepening	Understanding of the connotations of traditional customs	Comprehending the meanings behind traditional customs	Custom connotation understanding	They deeply understand that pasting Spring Festival couplets during the Spring Festival is to ward off evil spirits and welcome good luck	RB1: "Now they know that each custom has its meaning, such as eating zongzi during the Dragon Boat Festival is to commemorate Qu Yuan."

4. Results

4.1 Contributing to the Improvement of Language Abilities

When children are exposed to local cultural stories, they will encounter a large number of region - specific, diverse, and practical words, phrases, and sentence structures. For example, when listening to stories about local traditional festival celebrations, children will frequently come across characteristic words and vivid expressions such as "sacrifice", "pray for blessings", and "decorated with lanterns and streamers". RA1 said, "After listening to traditional festival stories many times, children can accurately use these words when describing festival scenes. Their language expression has become significantly richer and more accurate, and in the story - retelling session, the coherence of their sentences has also been greatly enhanced. Through the analysis of interview data, the comparison of children's language ability improvement is sorted out as shows in Table 3.

Table 3. The Analysis of Interview Data Results

Language Ability Index	Performance Before Exposure to Stories	Performance after Exposure to Stories
Vocabulary	On average, they mastered about 100 common words, mostly simple words used in daily life, such as "eat", "sleep", "cat", etc. (RA1: "Previously, the words children knew were very limited, basically those commonly used in daily life.")	On average, they mastered about 180 words, with a large number of new local cultural feature words added. For example, after listening to the Dragon Boat Festival story, they learned words such as "dragon boat racing", "the fragrance of zongzi leaves", and "Qu Yuan's drowning". (RA1: "After listening to the Dragon Boat Festival story, children not only knew these words but also could use them in appropriate contexts.")
Accuracy of vocabulary use	They made many mistakes when using words, often using inappropriate words. For example, when describing happiness, they would only use "happy" and occasionally use it in the wrong context. (RA1: "Before, they	They can accurately use the learned words to describe scenes and express emotions more precisely. For example, when describing the Spring Festival, they would say, "The whole family sits around, chatting and laughing, and jointly welcomes the new year. Everywhere is

	only had a few words to describe their mood and often used them incorrectly.")	filled with a strong flavor of the Spring Festival." (RA1: "Now children describe the Spring Festival with accurate and vivid words.")
Sentence coherence	When telling stories or expressing ideas, their sentences were short and lacked coherence, mostly simple subject - predicate - object structures, such as "I saw a cat. The cat ran away." (RA1: "Previously, when asking them to talk about a simple thing, it was all in scattered sentences.")	They can use conjunctions and complex sentence structures to make their sentences more coherent and fluent. For example, "I saw a cute cat with a furry body. Then it suddenly ran away, probably scared by something." (RA1: "Now children can make long and coherent sentences, expressing more abundant meanings.")
Expressive richness	Their expressions were simple and plain, lacking modifiers and details, such as "I went to the park today and saw flowers." (RA1: "Previously, they described things very straightforwardly, without many details.")	Their expressions are rich in details and emotions, and they can use rhetorical devices such as metaphors and personifications. For example, "I went to the park today and saw colorful flowers dancing in the wind like a group of lovely elves. It was so beautiful!" (RA1: "Now they describe things vividly, just like telling stories.")

4.2 Promoting the Deepening of Cultural Cognition

Local cultural stories can guide young children to gain an in - depth understanding of the core cultural elements of their hometown, such as historical origins, traditional customs, cultural celebrities, and unique regional landscapes. RB1 mentioned, "After listening to the ancient legends and historical stories of their hometown, children no longer have a superficial understanding of local culture. For example, they can elaborate on the characteristics and cultural connotations behind local traditional architectures and have a deeper understanding of these elements. In early literacy learning, they can better comprehend the cultural connotations behind the words, closely connect literacy with culture, and endow early literacy with richer meanings." The comparison of the deepening of children's cultural cognition is as shows in Table 4.

Table 4. The Comparison of The Deepening of Children's Cultural Cognition

Cultural Elements	Degree of Understanding Before Exposure to Stories	Degree of Understanding after Exposure to Stories
Historical origins	Only knew the names of a few major historical events in their hometown, such as "the founding of the local city", but hardly knew the time, reasons, and processes of these events. (RB1: "Previously, when asking children about the history of their hometown, they only knew the names, and that was all.")	Can clearly describe the detailed processes of important historical events in their hometown, such as "The local city was founded in the Ming Dynasty. Due to its convenient transportation and rich natural resources, it gradually developed." and understand its important significance for the development of their hometown. (RB1: "Now children know the history of their hometown in great detail and can also explain why these events are important.")
Traditional customs	Only knew the surface forms of some common traditional customs, such as pasting Spring Festival couplets during the Spring Festival, but did not understand their implications. (RB1: "Previously, they only knew that they should paste Spring Festival couplets during the Spring Festival but didn't know why.")	Deeply understand the cultural meanings behind traditional customs. For example, they know that pasting Spring Festival couplets during the Spring Festival is to ward off evil spirits and welcome good luck and also understand the unique functions of different customs in different festivals. (RB1: "Now they know that each custom has its meaning, such as eating zongzi during the Dragon Boat Festival is to commemorate Qu Yuan.")
Cultural celebrities	Only heard the names of a few local cultural celebrities and knew nothing about their achievements and contributions. (RB1: "When it came to local cultural celebrities, they only knew the names, and that was all.")	Can tell the main achievements and contributions of local cultural celebrities to their hometown, such as "This local celebrity wrote many famous poems, which made more people understand the beautiful scenery and

Regional landscapes	Could only name the regional landscapes in their hometown, such as "XX Mountain" and "XX Lake", and their descriptions were simple, just like "very high" or "very large". (RB1: "Previously, they used only a few simple words to describe the scenic spots in their hometown.")	cultural customs of our hometown." (RB1: "Now children can tell what the celebrities have done and their important significance to the hometown.") Are able to describe the unique features of regional landscapes and the cultural stories behind them. For example, "XX Mountain is not only beautiful, but there is also a legend that an immortal once practiced here in ancient times, so this mountain is full of mysterious colors." (RB1: "Now when they describe the scenic spots, they will add many interesting stories, which makes people eager to visit.")
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4.3 Stimulating Thinking and Creativity

The rich fantasy plots, distinct characters, and suspense - filled problem - solving situations in the stories provide a broad space for children's thinking expansion and creative imagination. RA2 said, "After telling local folk fairy tales, children often immerse themselves in the story world and imagine what new things would happen if the characters in the story came to modern society. They will record their whimsical ideas with simple paintings and childish words, and their thinking becomes more active and creative." In early childhood literacy activities, the stimulation of thinking and creativity is manifested as more active participation in literacy creation, breaking through conventional thinking, and expressing ideas from a unique perspective. The comparison of children's thinking and creativity stimulation is as shows in Table 5.

Table 5. The Comparison of Children's Thinking and Creativity Stimulation

Dimensions of Thinking and Creativity		Performance Before Exposure to Stories	Performance after Exposure to Stories
Richness of imagination		Their imagination was limited to common scenes and things in real life, such as imagining themselves playing in the park. (RA2: "Previously, when asked to imagine, they mostly thought about things happening around them.")	Their imagination is full of fantasy colors, such as imagining themselves going on adventures with characters from mythological stories, or that animals can talk and drive cars. (RA2: "After listening to the folk stories, their imagination has become extremely rich, with many novel scenes.")
Innovative thinking performance		When solving problems or creating, they mostly used conventional methods and lacked innovation. (RA2: "Before, when painting, they just followed the routine, and the paintings were very ordinary.")	They can think about problems from different angles and propose unique solutions. For example, when making handicrafts with waste items, they can turn beverage bottles into vases and decorate the vases with unique patterns. (RA2: "Now they have a lot of ideas when making handicrafts, and the things they make are very creative.")
Uniqueness of literacy creation		In story - making or painting - telling, the content was similar and lacked individuality. For example, the beginning of the story was mostly "Once upon a time, there was a little friend". (RA2: "Previously, the beginnings and plots of the stories they made up were almost the same.")	The story - making plots are unique, and the character settings are novel. For example, they create a story about a little magic mouse helping forest animals, and when telling the story with paintings, they can match unique pictures. (RA2: "Now the stories they make up are very interesting, and the pictures are also very imaginative.")

4.4 Facilitating the Cultivation of Reading Interest

The strong regional emotions and fascinating plots in local cultural stories have a strong attraction for children, which can greatly stimulate their enthusiasm and initiative to participate in reading activities. RA2 mentioned, "My child was not very active in reading before, but since he came into contact with those interesting local cultural stories, he asks me to read related books to him every day and will also seriously look at the pictures in the storybooks. His reading concentration and perseverance have been greatly improved." The comparison of children's reading interest changes as shows in Table 6.

Table 6. The Comparison of Children's Reading Interest Changes

Reading Behavior Performance	Before Exposure to Stories	After Exposure to Stories
Initiative in reading	They had no interest in reading and rarely asked to read books actively. Every time they read, they needed to be urged by parents or teachers. (RA2: "Previously, we had to coax and urge the child to read for a while.")	Their initiative in reading has increased significantly. They often actively ask to read local cultural storybooks and even take the initiative to look for related books to read. (RA2: "Now the child looks forward to reading storybooks every day and will go to the bookshelf to find unread ones by himself.")
Reading concentration time	Their reading concentration time was short, usually only able to focus on reading for 5 - 10 minutes, and were easily distracted by surrounding things. (RA2: "Previously, they couldn't sit still after reading for a while, and their attention was not concentrated.")	Their reading concentration time has been significantly extended. They can focus on reading for 20 - 30 minutes, immerse themselves in the story content, and are not easily disturbed by the outside world. (RA2: "Now when reading their favorite storybooks, they can read quietly for a long time and don't even hear when others call them.")
Preference for reading book types	Their reading book types were single, mainly focusing on a few simple picture books, such as the "Little Bear Cub" series. (RA2: "Previously, they only liked those few simple picture books.")	Their reading book types have become more diverse. They have developed a strong interest in local cultural storybooks and picture books containing cultural elements. (RA2: "Now, in addition to the previous picture books, they especially like to read books related to hometown culture.")

5. Discussion

This study systematically explored the role of local cultural stories in early childhood literacy education. The research findings are highly consistent with existing theories and empirical studies and also demonstrate certain practical extensibility and innovative significance. Firstly, in terms of language ability, the study found that after children were exposed to local cultural stories, their vocabulary significantly increased, and their sentence expressions became more coherent. This finding is highly consistent with Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, that is, children's language development is embedded in the cultural and social context in which they live. Local cultural stories not only provide rich language input materials but also construct semantic contexts, which help children acquire language within a familiar and concrete cultural framework. This also corroborates Chen's (2025) view that "cultural embedding contributes to language internalization." Secondly, the deepening of cultural cognition indicates that local cultural stories can serve as an effective medium for cultural identity education. In the study, children not only learned about local customs and history but also could extract cultural meanings from the stories.

This finding expands Smith's (2021) application perspective of cultural stories as educational resources. At the same time, it also responds to the "cultural sensitivity in early education" emphasized by Derman-Sparks et al. (2020), indicating that the research approach of this study is conducive to achieving the integration of cultural inheritance and education. Thirdly, in terms of stimulating thinking and creativity, the study shows that the fantasy elements and situational conflicts in the stories promote the development of children's non-linear thinking. Children can connect the story content with real life and express themselves creatively. This finding echoes the conclusion of Zhang et al. (2024) on the "positive promoting effect of local cultural stories on the development of children's creativity." Finally, the study also found that local cultural stories significantly enhanced children's reading interest and initiative. Children were more willing to participate in reading activities, and their reading concentration time was significantly extended. This is consistent with the theory proposed by Beck et al. (2002) that "cultural background knowledge promotes understanding and participation," indicating that cultural affinity can indeed improve children's acceptance and immersion in reading materials.

Although the research has achieved positive results, through interviews and previous teaching practices and observations, several practical problems have also emerged. Educators vary in their abilities regarding story selection and teaching strategies, which affects the educational effect. Families also differ in their emphasis on local cultural stories. Some families have low participation or insufficient resources, resulting in poor educational continuity. Moreover, this study has limitations. Only four respondents were selected for the sample, which is relatively small in size and limited in representativeness. Follow-up studies can expand the sample scope to cover more relevant people from different regions and cultural backgrounds, enhancing the universality of the research findings. In terms of research methods, quantitative methods such as questionnaires and experimental studies can be integrated to conduct in-depth explorations from multiple

dimensions. In the future, attention can also be paid to the application differences of local cultural stories in different educational environments, as well as their long-term impact on the development of young children.

6. Conclusion

To fully unleash the educational value of local cultural stories and address the above - mentioned challenges, schools, families, and communities need to collaborate closely: 1) School Level: Schools should incorporate local cultural stories into the education and teaching system, organize teachers to screen stories, and select those that suit children's development levels and interests. At the same time, provide professional training for teachers to enhance their understanding of the connotations of stories and teaching application abilities, and help teachers master diversified teaching methods such as scenario simulation and story continuation, so as to skillfully integrate local cultural stories into daily reading and writing courses. In addition, schools should actively build a communication bridge between home and school. Through holding parent lectures, schools can publicize the importance of local cultural stories in early childhood reading and writing education to parents and teach parent - child reading skills. Organize parent - child reading activities to encourage parents to share story - time with their children at home; 2) Family Level: Parents should actively cooperate with school education and attach importance to creating a family cultural education environment. Regularly read local cultural storybooks with children, guide children to think and ask questions during the reading process to enhance their understanding of the stories. Use holidays to take children to visit local cultural attractions, folk museums, etc., so that children can personally experience the local cultural atmosphere and deepen their understanding and perception of the cultural elements in the stories, strengthening the fundamental role of families in cultural inheritance and 3) Community Level: Communities should fully integrate cultural resources and organize various characteristic cultural activities. For example, invite folk artists to tell local stories and perform traditional skills to allow children to have close - range contact with local culture. Establish community children's cultural activity centers, hold local cultural story competitions, picture - book making activities, etc., to stimulate children's interest and creativity in local cultural stories, broaden children's channels to access local culture, and help children develop comprehensively. Through the collaborative efforts of schools, families, and communities, a strong educational synergy can be formed to achieve the in - depth integration of local cultural stories in early childhood literacy education, promote the all - around development of children, realize the organic unity of cultural inheritance and education, and lay a solid foundation for children's future learning and life.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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