

Study on the Development Pathways for Preservice Early Childhood Teachers' Pedagogical Content Knowledge in the Social Domain

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Abstract: Social Domain Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK) encompasses three components: subject-specific content knowledge, early childhood pedagogy, and teaching methodology. Presently, the cultivation of social domain PCK among pre-service early childhood educators in China faces challenges including an overemphasis on theoretical knowledge, fragmented understanding of learners' cognitive development, and outdated teaching methodologies. To enhance pre-service early childhood teachers' PCK in the social domain, higher education institutions should adhere to the principle of integrating theory with practice, emphasise core experiences in the social domain, and refine curriculum content development. They should establish a consortium of placement bases to highlight the pedagogical nature of pre-service education, and implement a multi-dimensional assessment approach that balances theoretical knowledge, practical skills, and innovation.

Keywords: Early Childhood Teachers; Social Domain Pedagogical Content Knowledge; Pathway Research.

1. The Fundamental Essence of Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK) in the Social Sciences

In 1986, American scholar William Schullman proposed a novel concept of teacher expertise—Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK)—in response to the fragmented approach to teacher training, where subject knowledge and pedagogical knowledge were treated as separate entities, representing what he termed the ‘missing paradigm’. He defined PCK as ‘a special integration of the teacher's personal experience, subject content knowledge, and pedagogy’ [1]. Since Schulman's introduction of PCK, scholars have converged on the understanding that ‘PCK constitutes the knowledge manifested when teachers integrate subject-specific content knowledge, knowledge of learners, and pedagogical methods within teaching practice. It represents practical knowledge formed through processes of integration and transformation’ [2]. This conceptualisation clarifies the distinction between subject teachers and domain specialists, while simultaneously signifying the emergence of teacher professionalism and charting a course for professional development.

As understanding of PCK deepens, its application domains have expanded. Since 2011, this research perspective has increasingly entered the field of early childhood education, with growing studies on PCK across the five domains. The Guidelines for Kindergarten Education state: ‘Kindergarten educational content is comprehensive and foundational, and may be relatively divided into five domains: health, language, social studies, science, and arts’ [3]. Unlike other educational stages, the early childhood stage does not organise content by subject but primarily by domain. Therefore, when applied to early childhood education, PCK can be interpreted as ‘Domain Pedagogical Content Knowledge’. Social domain PCK encompasses the integration of social domain pedagogical knowledge, children's prior knowledge, social domain teaching methodology, and knowledge dedicated to fostering children's social development and laying the foundations for sound character formation [4]. Social domain

PCK not only plays a crucial role in the professional development of pre-service early years practitioners but also provides clear direction for pre-service training institutions.

2. Challenges in Cultivating Preservice Early Childhood Teachers' Pedagogical Content Knowledge in the Social Domain

2.1. The Pronounced Trend Towards Theoreticalisation in Social Domain Teaching Knowledge

Social domain teaching knowledge constitutes practical expertise encompassing core experiences such as self-awareness, interpersonal interaction, prosocial behaviour, social cognition, and a sense of belonging. Pre-service early childhood educators predominantly acquire core social domain experiences through textbooks, lacking direct exposure to children's interpersonal interactions, social cognition, and sense of belonging. When designing social domain activities, they rely heavily on national policy documents such as the Preschool Children's Social Education curriculum and the Learning and Development Guide for Children Aged 3–6, often resulting in suboptimal outcomes. Surveys indicate that during their *Social Education for Preschool Children* course, 38.89% of pre-service teachers observed classroom teaching activities in nurseries between 1–5 times, while only 27.78% conducted trial teaching sessions in nurseries [5]. This highlights a significant gap in practical teaching knowledge within the social domain, with a disproportionate emphasis on theoretical instruction.

2.2. Pre-service Early Childhood Educators Possess a One-Sided Understanding of Their Teaching Subjects in the Social Domain

In social domain instruction, young children are the primary focus of education. Early childhood educators must

master three types of knowledge concerning children: children's learning trajectories, common errors children make when learning new concepts, and an understanding of individual differences among children [6]. Concurrently, the '14th Five-Year Plan for Enhancing Preschool Education Development' explicitly states that over the next five years, reforms in preschool education programmes must be deepened, training schemes refined, and foundational knowledge in early childhood development and education strengthened, with particular emphasis on cultivating students' practical abilities to observe and understand children while supporting their development [7]. Consequently, pre-service early years teachers require a certain level of observational skill to acquire domain-specific knowledge about their pupils and grasp the diversity of young children. Following visits and surveys of early years education programmes across institutions of varying levels, it was found that the course "Social Education of Preschool Children" is generally scheduled for the second year of study. A minority of institutions offer 1–3 weeks of short-term practical learning, while most employ simulated teaching as their practical method, with concentrated kindergarten placements occurring in the third year. Evidently, pre-service early childhood educators undergo prolonged simulated practice within academic settings, with limited observation periods. They experience insufficient extended, concentrated observation of educational subjects within kindergartens, resulting in a rather one-sided understanding of young children. Much of this understanding derives from classroom case studies, images, and videos. Consequently, they struggle to predict children's behaviour in actual teaching situations and lack the capacity for effective observation.

2.3. Outdated Teaching Methods in the Social Domain

Within the contemporary educational landscape, digitalisation has become a defining trend in educational reform. Exemplary specialist teachers continually integrate emerging pedagogical concepts and research novel teaching methodologies. Certain aspects of the social domain exhibit characteristics where 'actions speak louder than words,' relying more on verbal and behavioural modelling by teachers, making cognitive instruction challenging for young children. Currently, on one hand, teacher training institutions predominantly integrate pedagogical knowledge into general educational methods such as pedagogy and educational principles, clinging to traditional teaching approaches while neglecting subject-specific social studies methodologies. On the other hand, the scarcity of digital teaching materials for social studies fails to nourish pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) in this domain. Consequently, students remain confined to conventional pedagogical frameworks, struggling to integrate information advantages with their professional expertise—a situation profoundly detrimental to post-qualification professional development.

3. Pathways for Cultivating Preservice Early Childhood Teachers' Pedagogical Content Knowledge in the Social Domain

3.1. Prioritising Core Experiences to Refine Social Domain Curriculum Content

The Guidelines serve as a crucial guiding document for early childhood educators in conducting teaching activities. 'Core experiences' represent an interpretation of the Guidelines from a PCK perspective. Consequently, cultivating pre-service early childhood educators' PCK in the social domain cannot be separated from the support of core experiences. As the key vehicle for achieving educational objectives, the Preschool Social Domain Education curriculum should be restructured around core social domain experiences as its primary content.

Firstly, establish practical curriculum content based on core social domain experiences. These experiences represent an effective PCK-informed interpretation of the Guidelines. Utilising a combination of thematic lectures and observational study of kindergarten teaching practices, this approach enables pre-service teachers to rapidly grasp core concepts, facilitating activity design and delivery. For instance, taking 'prosocial behaviour' as a core experience theme: theoretically, lectures should cover 'the concept of prosocial behaviour, children's prosocial behaviours, and the value of prosocial behaviour'; practically, teachers should be provided with activity case studies to enrich their experience, followed by observing kindergarten activities related to prosocial behaviour and taking detailed lesson observation notes. Subsequently, group analysis examines whether core experiences are embedded within observed activity designs, prompting reflection on how such experiences can be integrated into teaching practice and alternative implementation approaches. This guided process encourages pre-service teachers to synthesise theory and practice, thereby constructing subject-specific pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) in the social domain.

Secondly, the tripartite integration of child development knowledge, social domain expertise, and social teaching strategies enriches understanding of the social domain's pedagogical subjects. As a highly practical discipline, early childhood education requires not only theoretical resources but also practical resources. This enables students to grasp children's current developmental status, the latest topics in the social domain, and innovative teaching methods in real-time within the classroom, thereby fostering the development of their PCK in the social domain.

Thirdly, provide multi-dimensional learning pathways to enhance pre-service early childhood teachers' practical knowledge in social domain teaching. In response to the national call for cultivating applied talents, higher education institutions should enhance preschool education students' practical teaching abilities in the social domain. Grounded in situated cognition theory and supported by multimedia technology, they should offer multi-channel practical opportunities. This enables students to observe children's behaviours within real-world scenarios, understand age-specific and psychological characteristics, and flexibly apply practical knowledge during activity design. This achieves a virtuous cycle where theory guides practice and practice enriches theory.

3.2. Establishing a Community of Internship Bases to Emphasise the “Teacher Training” Nature of Pre-service Education

Pre-service education must emphasise not only its ‘academic nature’ but more crucially its ‘pedagogical nature’. The ultimate goal of pre-service early childhood teacher training is to supply kindergartens with educators possessing specialised pedagogical knowledge and professional teaching competencies. Pre-service education must avoid an imbalance between the development of ‘academic nature’ and ‘pedagogical nature’ [8]. ‘Academic nature’ refers to theoretical knowledge in teacher education, serving as a prerequisite for demonstrating ‘pedagogical nature’, while ‘pedagogical nature’ pertains to the cultivation of practical educational competencies. Surveys indicate that ‘universities place insufficient emphasis on educational placements, with practical mentors’ guidance being marginalised’ [9]. This suggests that practising teachers attach little importance to students’ pedagogical orientation. To enhance both practical mentors’ and pre-service early childhood educators’ focus on pedagogical orientation, two approaches may be adopted: material incentives and emotional motivation, thereby establishing constructive placement bases.

Firstly, implement a dual-award system to foster placement base communities. Higher education institutions and kindergartens may establish long-term collaborative internship training programmes, setting up pre-service training funds. Based on student internship assessment outcomes, a dual-award system for both interns and practice base teachers can be implemented. This approach not only motivates students’ enthusiasm for internships but also encourages kindergarten mentors to treat interns with greater diligence and responsibility.

Secondly, foster emotional connections to establish a ‘dialogue-based’ internship community. This approach involves universities demonstrating genuine care for student placements while cultivating an equal partnership with practice bases. Such an arrangement enables both students and teachers to experience mutual emotional engagement grounded in equality, shared learning, and mutual support. This dialogue-based approach provides students with practical training opportunities and avenues for sharing experiences. For instance, utilising online platforms to establish a ‘Practicum Confidential’ WeChat group and official account enables daily sharing of internship anecdotes. This allows both practice mentors and university supervisors to monitor student progress in real-time and provide timely feedback, thereby fostering mutual emotional connection.

Thirdly, encouraging industry-education integration to strengthen the mutual benefits between universities and kindergartens. With limited reference materials in the social domain of early childhood education, pre-service kindergarten teachers primarily operate within internship base communities. On one hand, university internship supervisors can gather relevant early childhood data through student internship records to enrich classroom teaching, broaden students’ understanding of early childhood knowledge, and ultimately develop teaching reform case studies to advance their professional growth. Additionally, assignments can be designed to have students create play-based teaching aids integrating professional theory, addressing the issue of limited teaching resources in kindergartens and ultimately achieving industry-education integration.

3.3. Establishing a Multi-dimensional Evaluation Framework Integrating Theory, Skills and Innovation

Assessment constitutes the most critical component of pre-service early childhood teacher education. Within the PCK framework, comprehensive evaluation of pre-service teachers’ social domain PCK must prioritise their mastery of subject-specific knowledge and skills in this domain. Equally vital is fostering their agency in learning and promoting professional development. Higher education institutions may ultimately establish a multi-dimensional assessment system integrating theory, skills, and innovation by refining assessment objectives, content, and methodologies.

Firstly, evaluation objectives should emphasise long-term perspectives. Pre-service early childhood educators should possess solid professional theoretical knowledge in the social domain, alongside contemporary skills and pedagogical qualities relevant to this field. Traditional pre-service assessments predominantly rely on summative evaluation methods such as theoretical examinations, demonstrations of basic teaching competencies, and teaching design presentations to gauge professional competence, often neglecting formative assessment. Similarly, enhancing innovation literacy in the new era necessitates pre-service early childhood educators’ continuous reflection and summarisation during training, tailored to contemporary characteristics. Therefore, higher education institutions should establish long-term objectives, strengthen formative assessment, and develop a multi-dimensional evaluation model that equally values ‘theory, skills, and innovation.’

Secondly, evaluation content should prioritise Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK) in the social domain. Mastery of knowledge concerning the teaching subjects (Who), teaching content (What), and teaching methods (How) within the social domain constitutes essential learning for early childhood educators. These elements also serve as critical indicators for assessing their professional competence in this domain. Themes may be drawn from core social domain experiences such as self-awareness, interpersonal interactions, prosocial behaviour, social cognition, and sense of belonging. Students’ mastery of content, subject, and methodology knowledge can be assessed through the preparation of activity plans.

Thirdly, evaluation forms and methods should be diversified. In terms of assessment methods, performance-based evaluations such as pre-service teacher portfolio assessments for the social domain, lesson study analysis, short papers, and research reports may be introduced. Regarding assessment formats, group evaluations and collective assessments may be conducted. Given individual differences and interests, students’ unique characteristics should be respected by employing diverse assessment tools for grouped evaluations. This enables pre-service early childhood teachers to clearly identify their strengths and weaknesses, thereby avoiding blind choices in subsequent elective courses.

4. Conclusion

Social domain PCK is not only crucial for teachers’ professional development but also for children’s social development, representing a vital aspect of teacher competence. To cultivate pre-service early childhood teachers’ knowledge in social domain teaching, higher education institutions should consistently adhere to the

principle of integrating theory with practice. This entails not only theoretically emphasising core experiences in the social domain, expanding students' learning pathways, and refining curriculum content, but also practically establishing internship base communities, strengthening cooperation with kindergartens, developing industry-education integration, and highlighting the pedagogical nature of pre-service education. Furthermore, higher education institutions should establish a multi-dimensional assessment framework that integrates theory, skills, and innovation across evaluation objectives, content, formats, and methodologies. This approach addresses pre-service early childhood educators' self-development needs and lays a solid foundation for cultivating high-calibre early childhood teachers for the new era.

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