Scientific
Research
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Capturing "Sense of Belonging" in Preschool Curriculum Guidelines and Implications: An Analysis Based on Chinese and Australian Curriculum Guidelines

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Abstract

Belonging is an emotion that is essential to children's social development. More and more countries incorporate "belonging" into their preschool curriculum guidelines and conduct related research. However, there is still a gap in the study on belonging in Chinese curriculum guidelines. This study uses a sequential explanatory mixed-method to analyze the "Guidelines for the Learning and Development of Children Aged 3 - 6 and Being, Belong & Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia" to explore the Chinese and Australian curriculum guidelines construct belonging and related concepts. The results show that the frequency of words in the Chinese curriculum guide was lower than that in the Australian curriculum guide; in terms of concept definition, neither curriculum guide provides a precise definition of the concept of belonging. The Chinese curriculum guide tends to cultivate children's sense of belonging to a group in educational philosophy. In contrast, the Australian curriculum guide cultivates children's sense of self-belonging. Both curriculum guides provide educational recommendations in terms of educational practices, but the Australian curriculum guide also provides an example of an assessment of belongingness. Finally, on this basis, new insights are sought to improve the Chinese curriculum guide.

Keywords

Sense of Belonging, Curriculum Guide, Educational Inspiration

1. Introduction

Belonging refers to an intrinsic connection between an individual and the group

to which they belong, delineating, identifying, and maintaining a particular individual to a specific group and its subordination (Zhang, 1999). Curriculum guides in many countries are gradually emphasizing the important role of belonging in children's development. The emphasis on belonging in the Australian curriculum guide is evident from its title. "Belonging" is a useful concept in the Australian curriculum guide (Tillett & Wong, 2018). Therefore, the Australian Curriculum Guide is relevant to the content section of the Chinese Curriculum Guide on belonging. In this study, the overall research question is: how do the Chinese and Australian curriculum guides construct the concept of belonging and related concepts. Sub-questions are: 1) How often are belonging and related concepts mentioned in the Chinese and Australian curriculum guidelines? 2) How do curriculum guidelines describe belonging and its related concepts?

2. Methodology

2.1. Research Design

This study used a sequential explanatory mixed-method to analyze the curriculum guides, and the research process consisted of three steps.

Step 1: select relevant curriculum guidelines. The Guide to Learning and Development for 3 - 6 Year Olds (subsequently referred to as the Guide) and Belonging, Being and Becoming: A Framework for Early Learning in Australia (subsequently referred to as the Framework) were selected as The second step was to identify the sense of belonging.

Step 2: identify belonging and its related concepts. The study drew on Piškur et al.'s research on the definition of belonging and its related concepts. It used the nine core concepts for the word frequency analysis: belonging, community, diversity, equality, inclusion, participation, relationship, support, and value (Piškur et al., 2021).

Step 3: analyze the findings and draw conclusions and insights. In this stage, this study analyzes how the Chinese and Australian curriculum guides construct a sense of belonging and its related concepts based on the quantitative and qualitative analysis results. Finally, new implications for Chinese curriculum guides are sought on this basis.

2.2. Data Collection and Processing

Data for this study were obtained from the content sections of the Chinese and Australian curriculum guides dealing with belonging. The data were processed in two stages. The first stage was a quantitative analysis in **Table 1**. The quantitative analysis involved identifying nine core concepts using the "Weiciyun" software and calculating and comparing the relative word frequencies of the concepts in the two curriculum guides. The second stage was a qualitative analysis in **Table 2**. Qualitative analysis uses text analysis methods to analyze the curriculum guide's description of belonging along three dimensions: conceptual definition, educational philosophy, and educational practice.

Table 1. Word frequency table of nine core concepts.

	Guidelines for the Learning and Development of Children Aged 3 - 6 (23,571 words)	Being, Belong & Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia (38,410 words)
Belonging	0.11%	0.69%
Community	0.11%	3.33%
Diversity	0.11%	1.13%
Equality	0.21%	0.59%
Inclusion	0.00%	0.69%
Participation	0.27%	2.74%
Relationships	0.74%	2.84%
Support	1.11%	2.14%
Value	0.05%	0.33%

Table 2. Summary of qualitative analysis results.

Curriculum Guide	Main categories	Content
Guidelines for Learning and Development of Children Aged 3 - 6	Concept definition	A sense of belonging is when individuals identify with their group and feel recognized and accepted, thus creating a sense of belonging to the group.
	Educational Philosophy	Sense of family belonging, sense of community belonging, sense of national belonging
	Educational Practice	Teacher-child interaction, play activities, participation in groups, emotional stimulation.
Being, Belong & Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia	Concept definition	"Belonging" is a complex, multi-layered concept
	Educational Philosophy	Sense of self-belonging
	Educational Practice	Teacher-child interaction, play activities, participation in groups, emotional stimulation, respect for children's diversity, listening to children's emotional expression

2.3. Results

This study provides the results derived from the quantitative analysis (see **Table 1**) and the qualitative analysis (see **Table 2**).

2.3.1. Results of the Quantitative Analysis of the Sense of Belonging in the Curriculum Guide

1) Analysis of the results of the overall word frequency in the curriculum guide

According to the overall word frequency, the relative word frequencies of "belonging", "community", "diversity", "equality", "inclusion", "participation", "relationship", "support" and "value" in the Guide are 0.11%, 0.11%, 0.21% respectively. The Framework's relative word frequencies of belonging, community, diversity, equality, inclusion, participation, relationship, support, and value are 0.69%, 3.33%, 1.13%, 0.59%, and 0.69%, respectively. The relative frequency of "relationship" is high in the Guide and Framework, with 0.74% in the Guide and 2.84% in the Framework. The relative word frequency of "belonging" is low in the Guide and the Framework, with 0.11% in the Guide and 0.69% in the Framework. That shows that "relationship" is the core concept with the highest relative word frequency, and "belonging" is the core concept with the lowest relative word frequency in the overall word frequency analysis of the two curriculum guides.

2) Analysis of the results of the respective word frequencies in the curriculum guide

The relative frequency of the nine core concepts in their respective curriculum guides varied. In the China Curriculum Guide, "support" is the most frequent word in the Guide, at 1.11%. "Inclusion" is the least frequent word in the Guide, at 0.00%. In the Australian Curriculum Guide, "community" is the most frequent word in the Framework, with 3.33%, and "values" is the least frequent word, with 0.33%. Thus, in the respective word frequency analysis of the curriculum guide, "support" and "inclusion" are the core concepts with the highest and lowest relative word frequency in the Guide, and "community" and "values" are the highest and lowest relative word frequency core concepts in the Framework. It is noteworthy that all nine core concepts are mentioned in the Australian Curriculum Guide, but the word "inclusion" is not mentioned in the Chinese Curriculum Guide.

3) Comparison of word frequency differences in the respective curriculum guides

A comparison of the differences between the nine core concepts in the curriculum guides shows that the fold of the Guide is significantly lower than the fold of the Framework (see **Figure 1**). It can be seen that the relative word frequencies of all nine core concepts in the Guide are lower than those in the Framework. According to the trend of the line, the relative word frequencies of the nine core concepts in the Framework show a decreasing trend, and the relative word frequencies of each core concept differ little from each other. The relative word frequencies of the nine core concepts in the Guide fluctuate, and the relative word frequencies of each core concept differ significantly from each other. Therefore, the relative word frequencies of all nine core concepts in the Guide are lower than those in the Framework.
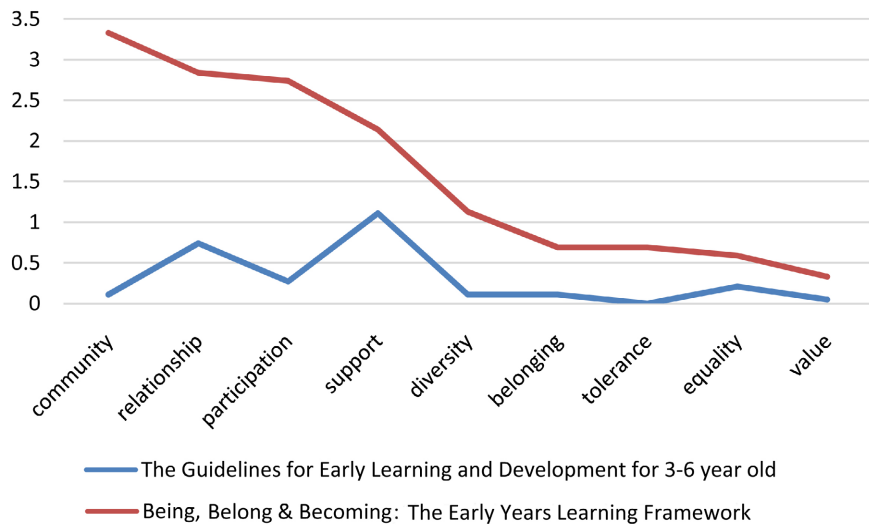
Figure 1. Line graph of the relative word frequency of the nine core concepts.

2.3.2. Results of the Qualitative Analysis of the Sense of Belonging in the Curriculum Guide

1) Analysis of concept definition in the curriculum guide

The conceptual definition refers to a "sense of belonging" or the scope of definition in the curriculum guidelines. Although the Guidelines do not precisely state the definition of the concept of belonging, the Interpretation of the Guidelines for the Learning and Development of Children Aged 3 - 6 (subsequently referred to as the Interpretation) provides a specific explanation of belonging. The Interpretation indicates that a sense of belonging is when individuals identify with their group and feel recognized and accepted, thus creating a sense of belonging to the group (Ministry of Education, 2012). Belonging is given a prominent place in the Australian Curriculum Guide. The Framework states that children develop a sense of belonging in early childhood settings when they feel accepted, develop a sense of attachment, and trust those who care for them (AGDEEWR, 2009). Although belonging is a prominent theme in the EYLF (Early Years Learning Framework), the Framework's definition of the concept of belonging remains vague (Sumsion, 2018a).

2) Analysis of the educational philosophy in the curriculum guide

Educational philosophy refers to the educational ideology and values that reflect a sense of belonging in the curriculum guidelines. The educational concept of a sense of belonging is extracted from the "Goal 3: Have an initial sense of belonging" in the Guidelines, which mainly includes belonging to the family, the collective (community), and the nation. Specifically, 3 - 4 year olds should have a sense of belonging to their families, where children "know the family members they live with and feel that they are part of a family"; 4 - 5 year olds should have a sense of belonging to a group (community), where children "like their kindergarten and class and actively participate in collective activities"; Children aged 5 - 6 years have a sense of belonging to a nation, and they "know their ethnicity and that China is a multi-ethnic family" (Zhang, 2015).

The concept of "self-belonging" education is embedded throughout the early learning framework in Australia. "Self-belonging" recognizes the interdependence of children and others and the relational basis for defining identity, which is central to children's Being and Becoming in early childhood and across the lifespan (AGDEEWR, 2009). Specifically, the Framework's "Outcome 1: Children have a strong sense of identity" suggests that children learn about themselves and construct their own identities within their families and communities. Experiences shape it. When children have positive experiences, they develop an understanding of themselves as significant and respected and feel a sense of belonging. Relationships are the foundations for the construction of identity—"who I am", "how I belong", and "what influence I have" (AGDEEWR, 2009).

3) Analysis of educational practices in the curriculum guide

Educational practices refer to the educational recommendations or teaching methods in the curriculum guides for fostering a sense of belonging. Both curriculum guides provide educational recommendations for fostering children's sense of belonging. The educational recommendations in the Guides detail specific recommendations for early childhood educators to foster children's sense of belonging. The educational practices of the Guidelines can be summarized in four areas: teacher-child interaction, play activities, participation in groups, and emotional stimulation. Teacher-child interaction is mainly manifested in teachers' making children feel the warmth of their families and kindergartens by going through photos and telling stories about their growth with them. Play activities mainly show that teachers create a warm atmosphere in families and classes by playing and laughing with children. Participation in the collective is mainly expressed because kindergartens should often organize various forms of collective activities to develop a sense of collective honor among children. Emotional stimulation is mainly expressed in the fact that teachers should use ways that are enjoyable and understandable to young children to stimulate their love songs for their hometowns and motherland (Ministry of Education, 2012).

The Framework includes specific recommendations for fostering children's sense of belonging in "Outcome 1" and "Outcome 2". The Framework's educational practices can be summarized in six areas: teacher-child interaction, play activities, participation in groups, emotional stimulation, respect for children's diversity, and listening to children's emotional expressions. Teacher-child interaction is primarily expressed in the teacher's ability to respond sensitively to children's cues and signals and initiate a willingness to interact and dialogue. Play activities are characterized by the teacher's provision of opportunities for children to carry out tasks and play independently. Participation in groups is evidenced by the teacher's approach that helps facilitate small group interaction and play experiences. Emotional stimulation is evidenced by teachers promoting children's sense of belonging, connection, and well-being. Respect for children's diversity is evident in the way teachers acknowledge the diversity of children, families, communities, and cultures. Listening to children's emotional expressions is primarily expressed in the way teachers support children emotionally to

express their thoughts and feelings (AGDEEWR, 2009). The Framework also presents examples of children's sense of belonging assessments. For example, they "feel and respond to a sense of belonging," "children begin to recognize their right to belong to many communities," and "children demonstrate a sense of belonging and comfort with their self-generated environment" (AGDEEWR, 2009).

3. Discussion

3.1. Word Frequency Analysis

The word frequency analysis shows that the frequency of belonging and its related concepts in the Chinese curriculum guide is lower than that of the Australian curriculum guide. The main reasons for this are twofold. First, there is less textual distribution of belonging in the Guide than in the Framework. In the Guide, the educational goal of "having an initial sense of belonging" is only one of the goals in the social domain, and the text is less frequent. However, the concept of "belonging" education is present throughout the Early Learning Framework in Australia, with a high proportion of texts. Second, the different historical backgrounds of China and Australia have led to different emphases in the development of the curriculum guides. Australia's colonization brought significant changes and disruptions to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander lifestyles. Research has shown that Aboriginal families are less involved in early childhood education and care programs than the national average. As a result, Australia's ECEC (Early Childhood Education and Care) service is based on the National Curriculum Document, a program designed to promote children's belonging, development, and learning, particularly for those families at risk of marginalization (Biggart, 2013).

3.2. Concept Definition

Neither curriculum guide offers a precise definition of belonging. However, "belonging" in the Framework is still an untheorized pedagogical concept. Belonging is considered the psychosocial "glue" that connects people, represents the relationship of parts to the whole, and creates a sense of solidarity. However, this understanding raises some profound questions: What does belonging mean? How does belonging come about? How is it experienced and expressed? Emilson et al. argue that "belonging" is not ultimately achievable but rather evolves, is formulated, debated, and negotiated in different times, places, and groups of our daily lives (Emilson & Eek-Karlsson, 2021). Thus, belonging is gradually conceptualized as a multi-layered, dynamic, relationally constructed phenomenon (Puroila et al., 2021). The conceptual meaning of "belonging" in the Australian Curriculum Guide has shown a trend of diversity.

3.3. Educational Philosophy

In terms of educational philosophy, the Chinese Curriculum Guide cultivates children's sense of group belonging, while the Australian Curriculum Guide cultivates children's sense of self-belonging. The sense of group belonging in the

Guide mainly includes a sense of family belonging, a sense of collective (community) belonging, and a sense of national belonging. A sense of group belonging is an emotion in which individuals consciously belong to the group in which they participate and is an essential factor in the existence and development of the group (Wang et al., 2019). However, the Framework states in the "Vision for Children's Learning" section that a sense of self-belonging is the Australian Early Learning Framework system (AGDEEWR, 2009). Children's lives are defined as a view of "Belonging", "Being", and "Becoming". "Belonging" is the core of "Being" and "Becoming" (AGDEEWR, 2009). Therefore, the Framework prefers the development of children's sense of self-belonging.

3.4. Educational Practice

Both curriculum guides provide educational recommendations, but the Australian curriculum guide also provides an assessment exemplar for a sense of belonging. Such assessment exemplars help early childhood educators capture how children develop a sense of belonging. Increasingly, scholars are looking to scientifically capture and explain the development of children's sense of belonging. Salonen et al. explored how children negotiate and construct their sense of belonging through interactions with adults, peers, and physical objects (Salonen et al., 2016). Puroila et al. used a relational and intersectional approach to explore how children's sense of belonging is formed (Puroila et al., 2021). Strycharz-Banaś et al. traced children's negotiation of belonging in child conflict and conflict-like scenarios (Strycharz-Banaś et al., 2020). However, whether "belonging" as a complex phenomenon and lived experience can be directly observed or even assessed is controversial (Sumsion et al., 2018b).

4. Suggestions and Inspirations for Chinese Education

4.1. Focus on Research Related to Children's Sense of Belonging in Chinese Curriculum Guidelines

The frequency of nine core concepts in the Guide is lower than that of the Framework, which indicates that the Australian Curriculum Guide is richer in the content on a sense of belonging. In recent years, most Chinese scholars' research directions on children's sense of belonging have focused on groups such as left-behind children and migrant children. At the same time, there are few studies related to the sense of belonging in curriculum guides. In the WOS, there is a wealth of research on the sense of belonging in the Australian Curriculum Guide. The research topics include a diverse exploration of the concept of belonging, the theoretical basis of belonging, educational strategies for belonging, the role of belonging, the educational experience of belonging, and the understanding of belonging by different groups (e.g., educators and children). Therefore, Chinese scholars can learn from the Australian research on the sense of belonging in curriculum guidelines from a localized perspective, focus on the research on the sense of belonging in the Guide, broaden the research themes and increase the depth of the research on the sense of belonging.

4.2. Enriching the Conceptual Meaning of Children's Sense of Belonging in the Chinese Curriculum Guide

Neither curriculum guide presents an exact conceptual definition of belonging. However, research has shown that belonging to the Australian Framework is a complex multilevel concept (Sumsion & Wong, 2011). For example, Selby et al. found that the concept of "belonging" in EFLY has two different meanings when applied to infants: the first is "marked" belonging; the second is "unmarked" belonging (Selby et al., 2018). Sumsion and Wong proposed ten ways of conceptualizing belonging in the social and interpersonal domains: emotional, social, cultural, spatial, temporal (e.g., past, present, future senses), physical, spiritual, moral/ethical (e.g., the right to belong here), political (citizenship), and legal (Strycharz-Banaś et al., 2020). Maine et al. explored children's understanding of belonging and found that children's ideas could be divided into six interrelated aspects: Spatiality, Materiality, Multiplicity, Social Relations, Affect, and Dislocation (Maine et al., 2021). It can be seen that the concept of belonging in the Framework is complex to define but vulnerable to simplistic interpretations (Sumsion et al., 2018b). Therefore, belonging should not be a single and narrow concept for the Chinese curriculum guide. The richness of the Guide's connotation of "belonging" deserves further study by Chinese scholars.

4.3. Focus on the Development of Children's Sense of Self-Belonging in the Chinese Curriculum Guidelines

A sense of self-belonging is an integral part of human existence. However, research has found that Chinese curriculum guidelines prefer to foster a sense of group belonging in children. Group belonging and self-belonging are mutually influential. "Belonging" reveals the interdependence between young children and others and emphasizes the critical role of relationships in defining the self (AGDEEWR, 2009). Children first belong to a family, a cultural group, a neighborhood community, and the broader society. Children gradually expand their interrelationships with people, things, and objects in interacting with their families, cultural groups, and the broader community to enhance their sense of self-belonging (Yuan & Wang, 2014). It follows that children develop a sense of group belonging that leads to a positive self-concept and thus enhances their sense of self-belonging (Yu & Han. 2014). The Guidelines should focus on developing children's sense of self-belonging so that children can develop a sense of self-belonging based on forming a sense of group belonging. Therefore, how introducing a sense of self-belonging into the Chinese Curriculum Guide is a topic worth further exploration.

4.4. Improve the Assessment of Children's Sense of Belonging in the Chinese Curriculum Guide

The Australian Curriculum Guide proposes an example of assessing children's sense of belonging, which is worthy of reference in the Chinese Curriculum

Guide. However, because scholars do not have a unified view of the composition of the internal structure of belonging, the development of tools for measuring belonging varies (Chen, 2014). Among the sense of belonging measurement instruments developed abroad, one of the more widely used is the School Sense of Belonging Measurement Scale, or PSSM (the psychological sense of school membership), developed by Goodenow in 1993. This scale can investigate the state of belongingness at both class and school levels (Goodenow, 2016). In addition, Chinese scholars have reformulated school belongingness measurement instruments, such as the School Sense of Belonging Scale for elementary school students developed by Guangsheng Guo, which contains four dimensions: academic focus, humanistic environment, peer relationships, and school involvement (Guo, 2009). The complexity of the belongingness structure determines the complexity of its measurement instrument development. There is a paucity of research on assessing children's sense of belonging, and future researchers could explore how to assess children's sense of belonging.

5. Conclusion

A sense of belonging plays a vital role in young children's learning and development. However, little research has focused on the constructs of belonging in Chinese preschool curriculum guidelines. This study explores the constructs of belonging and its related concepts in Chinese and Australian curriculum guidelines and seeks new insights into Chinese curriculum guidelines. Based on the analysis of the findings, the Chinese curriculum guidelines can be improved by focusing on research related to belonging, enriching the conceptual meaning of belonging, focusing on the development of children's sense of self-belonging, and improving the assessment of children's sense of belonging. However, this paper also has limitations. Regarding the selection of research subjects, this study only analyzes two curriculum guides in China and Australia, and future researchers can integrate multiple national preschool curriculum guides for analysis. In terms of research methodology, the qualitative analysis is only cut into the analysis from three dimensions: concept definition, educational philosophy, and educational practice. Future researchers can analyze preschool curriculum guidelines from a multidimensional approach. This study contributes to the research related to the sense of belonging in Chinese preschool curriculum guidelines by capturing and analyzing the descriptions of the sense of belonging in the preschool curriculum guidelines of both countries.

Acknowledgements

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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