



The Implementation of Thematic Course in the Intergenerational Learning Between Older Adults and Young Children: Take “Zongzi-Making for the Dragon Boat Festival” as an Example

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Published Online: 13 June 2025	The implementation of thematic curricula in intergenerational learning (IGL) can foster meaningful and reciprocal learning experiences for both older adults and young children. A compelling example is the activity of “Zongzi-making for the Dragon Boat Festival,” which integrates cultural heritage with experiential learning, and aiming to promote cultural exchange and interactive learning between older adults and young children. The curriculum is grounded in the context of traditional Taiwanese festivals and emphasizes a life-based learning. Through hands-on activities, young children learn by doing, allowing them to construct the meaning and experience of life within a culturally themed curriculum.
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1. INTRODUCTION

Although aging is a universal biological process shared by all human beings, the meanings and lived experiences associated with growing older vary significantly across cultural, social, and individual contexts. These diverse perspectives shape how aging is perceived, valued, and addressed within different societies (de Guzman & Laguilles-Villafuerte, 2021; Zhang & Wu, 2025). While aging is an inevitable biological process experienced universally, from an educational standpoint, the question of how to effectively support older adults in achieving successful aging constitutes a critical area of inquiry. The implementation of thematic courses in intergenerational learning between older adults and young children represents a pedagogically significant approach that not only fosters meaningful intergenerational engagement but also contributes to the

physical, cognitive, and emotional well-being of older participants, thereby facilitating positive aging outcomes. Intergenerational practice, where older adults and young children come together for shared activities, has grown in popularity in many Western countries. The intergenerational approach is a proven method for education and service programming with older adults, children, and youth (Ames & Youatt, 1994; Lyndon & Moss, 2023; Malone & Dadswell, 2018; Park & Park, 2025).

The concept of integrating thematic course into intergenerational learning (IGL) is indeed a powerful strategy to foster meaningful learning experiences. “Zongzi-making for the Dragon Boat Festival” is an excellent example of how thematic learning can bridge cultural traditions with hands-on experiences, creating an interactive environment for both older adults and young children. This kind of activity not only

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promotes the transmission of cultural knowledge but also nurtures the development of fine motor skills, teamwork, and intergenerational bonds. In the context of Taiwanese preschool education, the implementation of thematic course provides a valuable framework to support young children’s holistic development. A thematic approach allows for more personalized and integrated learning, as it connects different subject areas through a central theme that is meaningful and relatable to young learners. This approach is aligned with the Ministry of Education’s vision for fostering creativity, critical thinking, and cultural awareness among young children (Ministry of Education, 2017). However, there are several challenges to overcome. These might include the need for professional development for educators to design and implement effective thematic units, balancing curriculum standards with the freedom for creative exploration, and ensuring that the activities are developmentally appropriate for both the younger and older participants in IGL programs. Additionally, ensuring that the cultural content is taught in a way that is accessible and engaging for children, while respecting its deep significance for older generations, requires careful planning and collaboration between educators, families, and community members (Shih, 2024a).

Grounded in this conceptual foundation, this article investigates the design and implementation of an intergenerational learning curriculum titled “Zongzi-Making

for the Dragon Boat Festival.” The curriculum is intended to cultivate meaningful interactions between older adults and young children by engaging them in shared traditional cultural practices. Through the collaborative process of making zongzi, the curriculum not only promotes cross-generational communication but also facilitates the transmission of intangible cultural heritage in a developmentally appropriate and socially enriching context.

2. CURRICULUM DESIGN CONCEPT

This article designed an intergenerational learning curriculum themed around “Making Zongzi for the Dragon Boat Festival,” aiming to promote cultural exchange and interactive learning between older adults and young children. The curriculum is grounded in the context of traditional Taiwanese festivals and emphasizes a life-based learning. Through hands-on activities, young children learn by doing, allowing them to construct the meaning and experience of life within a cultural curriculum. The curriculum is divided into the main stages:

2.1. Developing the Intergenerational Learning Course

A compelling example is the activity of “Zongzi-making for the Dragon Boat Festival,” which integrates cultural heritage with experiential learning. This thematic approach not only strengthens intergenerational bonds but also enriches children's understanding of cultural traditions.

Intergenerational learning course	
Date	May 29, 2025
Time	10:10 a.m.–11:40 a.m.
Location	Preschool classroom
Participants	16 young children and 7 older adults
Theme	Zongzi-making for the Dragon Boat Festival The Dragon Boat Festival, also known as Duanwu Festival, is one of the most important traditional holidays in Chinese culture, celebrated on the 5th day of the 5th lunar month. The festival is rich in cultural meaning, linked to warding off evil

“The Implementation of Thematic Course in the Intergenerational Learning Between Older Adults and Young Children:
Take “Zongzi-Making for the Dragon Boat Festival” as an Example”

	spirits, commemorating historical figures like the poet Qu Yuan, and expressing family bonds and cultural traditions. The intergenerational learning course.
Goals	1. Promoting interaction between young children and older adults. Teachers guide children to learn about the origins, customs, and cultural significance of the Dragon Boat Festival and zongzi (rice dumplings). Older adults are invited to share their memories of the festival and experiences of making zongzi. Young children and older adults participate together in the activity of making zongzi. During the process, older adults serve as helpers and storytellers, teaching techniques and sharing the stories and meanings behind zongzi (Shih, Wu & Chung, 2022). 2. Young children are encouraged to express their learning experiences and cultural understanding through drawing, oral sharing, or dramatization, followed by feedback and interaction with the older adults. Teachers guide the older adults through helping young children complete a project and creating a sense of accomplishment (Shih, Wu & Chung, 2022).

2.2. Theoretical Foundations for Thematic Course

2.2.1. Dewey’s Experiential Learning Theory

Dewey defined education in *Democracy and Education* as “that reconstruction or reorganization of experience which adds to the meaning of experience, and which increases ability to direct the course of subsequent experience.” Dewey emphasized that “education is life itself” and that real learning should be rooted in children's lived experiences. In this curriculum, making zongzi is not merely a skill to be learned, but a culturally meaningful life practice. Through joint activities with older adults, young children are able to explore, experiment, and reflect in authentic contexts, fostering active learning and social participation. This reflects Dewey’s principles of continuity and interaction in experience (Dewey, 1916, 1930; Shih, 2024b).

2.2.2. Vygotsky’s Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)

Vygotsky regarded the question of the relationship between development and the learning process as primarily a theoretical one. Since his theory regards education as being closely connected with development, however, and development as taking place in the actual socio-cultural environment. Vygotsky believed that children’s learning potential can be advanced with the assistance of more experienced individuals. In this curriculum, older adults act as cultural and life-experience “scaffolders,” helping children complete the zongzi-making activity that they may not be able to accomplish independently. This intergenerational understanding and collaboration not only expands children’s ZPD but also builds a respectful and trusting intergenerational relationship (Ivich, 2024; Vygotsky, 1978).

2.2.3. Freire’s Dialogical Education

“Instruction” is the core of educational practice. “Instruction” includes teaching and learning. It is a subject that education practice must face. However, the essence of teaching and learning should be dialogic. Because there is no dialogue, there is no communication. Without communication, there can be no real education. There can be no real teaching and learning. Freire emphasized that education should be a dialogical process rather than one-way transmission. The intergenerational interactions in this curriculum adopt an open dialogical approach, respecting the experiences and voices of all participants. Young children and older adults are encouraged to ask questions, listen, and express themselves reciprocally. This two-way learning model breaks the boundaries of age and authority, embodying Freire’s educational spirit of being “co-learners rather than instructors,” and contributes to the creation of a reciprocal and democratic learning environment (Berthoff, 1987; Chen et al, 2025; Freire, 2000; Shih, 2018).

2.3. Approaches to Developing Thematic Curricula

2.3.1. Themes for Young Children and Older Adults

Curriculum planning for young children and older adults must be comprehensive, integrating learning experiences from various fields. Such planning requires a “systematic and purposeful” approach, with the integration of education and care activities based on the curriculum orientation. Teachers should tailor teaching activities in accordance to the curriculum; establish coherence between the daily routine, diverse learning activities, and whole-preschool activities; and cumulatively enhance learning experience for young children and older adults. Thematic curricula should be anchored in themes that are deeply connected to lived experiences, interests, and everyday environments for young children and older adults. Themes offer authentic and meaningful learning contexts, making educational experiences more engaging and relevant. By integrating multiple subject areas—such as language, social studies, science, and the arts—these themes promote interdisciplinary learning, fostering deeper conceptual understanding, critical thinking, and creativity within a cohesive and holistic framework for young children

and older adults (Ministry of Education, 2017; Shih, 2024a, 2024c).

3.2 Cultural Relevance

Incorporating local and indigenous culture into thematic units is essential. In Taiwan, themes can include traditional festivals, local history, or environmental issues, allowing young children and older adults to connect with their cultural heritage. Indigenous knowledge and perspectives can also be integrated to make learning more relevant and respectful of Taiwan’s diverse communities for young children and older adults (Shih & Tseng, 2025).

3.3 Project-Based Learning

Project-Based Learning (PBL) is reshaping contemporary classrooms by engaging students in authentic, real-world challenges and promoting deeper understanding through experiential learning. Thematic projects, in particular, encourage active participation and hands-on exploration. For instance, in a unit centered on the theme of water, children might investigate local water sources, observe natural water phenomena, and create water-inspired artwork. Such an approach nurtures students’ inquiry skills, enhances their problem-solving abilities, and cultivates critical thinking (Almulla, 2020).

3. CONCLUSIONS

Throughout the course of educational development, numerous challenges have emerged. For example, many countries around the world are currently grappling with demographic shifts, particularly declining birth rates and a rapidly aging population. Education is widely recognized as a fundamental driver for fostering social harmony and sustainable development (Shih & Wang, 2021). However, these demographic trends pose significant challenges to the sustainable development of contemporary societies. In response, promoting the harmonious coexistence of older adults and young children has become an urgent concern that many nations must address. This article examines the implementation of an intergenerational learning curriculum titled “Zongzi-Making for the Dragon Boat Festival,” which

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seeks to facilitate meaningful interaction between older adults and young children through engagement in traditional cultural practices. Intergenerational interactions within the framework of cultural transmission offer a valuable platform for cultivating deeper mutual understanding across generations.

In conclusion, intergenerational learning seems to be finally on the educational agenda. Thousands of initiatives in the way of intergenerational learning programs and practices are being implemented internationally to facilitate learning opportunities among different generations (Sánchez, Whitehouse & Johnston, 2017). The implementation of thematic curricula in intergenerational learning (IGL) can foster meaningful and reciprocal learning experiences for both older adults and young children. A compelling example is the activity of “Zongzi-making for the Dragon Boat Festival,” which integrates cultural heritage with experiential learning. This thematic approach not only strengthens intergenerational bonds but also enriches young children’s understanding of cultural traditions. Furthermore, this article further examines the theoretical underpinnings of thematic curriculum, drawing on John Dewey’s theory of experiential learning, Lev Vygotsky’s concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), and Paulo Freire’s philosophy of dialogical education. The incorporation of these theoretical perspectives seeks to enrich the conceptual foundation of intergenerational learning between older adults and young children, thereby providing a more robust basis for pedagogical reflection and practice. Through the integration and application of these frameworks, a more nuanced understanding of key dimensions—namely “experience,” “scaffolded interaction,” and “dialogue”—within intergenerational learning processes can be developed. Such theoretical grounding supports the design of culturally responsive and practice-oriented local curricula that are attuned to the lived realities of both age groups. Furthermore, this article introduces various approaches to developing thematic curricula, including themes for young children and older adults, cultural relevance, and project-based learning. Finally, the adoption of thematic curricula in Taiwanese preschool education presents both significant opportunities and complex challenges. When

thoughtfully designed, thematic instruction enables educators to create engaging, developmentally appropriate experiences that promote young children’s holistic growth and learning (Dewey, 1916, 1930; Freire, 2000; Ministry of Education, 2017; Shih, 2024a; Vygotsky, 1978).

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