



## Exploring Learning Themes in Taiwan's Early Childhood Education and Care Curriculum Framework: Insights from Confucian Educational Philosophy of "Benevolence (Ren)"

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**KEYWORDS:** young children, early childhood education, life education, multicultural education, aesthetic education, moral education

**ABSTRACT:** Anchored in the educational philosophy of benevolence (Ren, 仁), Taiwan's Early Childhood Education and Care Curriculum Framework articulates nine learning goals and emphasizes the cultivation of six core competencies in young children. The framework systematically incorporates life education, multicultural education, aesthetic education, and moral education as key dimensions to support the holistic and balanced development of young learners. This paper adopts Confucius's concept of benevolence (Ren) as a central interpretive lens to provide a philosophical analysis of the learning themes embedded within Taiwan's Early Childhood Education and Care Curriculum Framework.

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

The Interim Outline for the Early Childhood Education and Care Curriculum Framework, first released on October 5, 2012, underwent a comprehensive four-year revision process and was formally promulgated as the ECECCF on December 1, 2015, with full implementation commencing on August 1, 2017. The ECECCF (hereinafter referred to as the curriculum framework) functions as a foundational policy and pedagogical guideline, providing a systematic framework for educators to design curricula that are responsive to the developmental characteristics and learning needs of preschool children. Within this framework, preschool teachers are encouraged to apply its guiding principles to design developmentally appropriate, meaningful, and contextually relevant learning experiences. Moreover, the curriculum framework reflects a dynamic and evolving understanding of early childhood learning, emphasizing the integration of cultural context and educational practice. It supports the co-construction of knowledge through culturally responsive and socially situated learning processes, thereby fostering children's holistic development within Taiwan's unique sociocultural environment. The curriculum framework emphasizes life education, multicultural education, aesthetic education, and moral education as essential components in the holistic development of young children. A philosophical reflection on the learning themes for young children in Taiwan's Early Childhood Education & Care Curriculum Framework derived from Confucius's educational philosophy of "benevolence( 仁 )." It is hoped that such an exploration can broaden young children's learning horizons, and enhance the quality of early childhood education in Taiwan (Juan, Shih & Kao, 2025; Ministry of Education, 2017; Shih & Chang, 2023; Shih, 2024; Wu, 2023).

### 2. What's 仁 (Ren)

For Confucianism nowadays, the characteristics and relationship between 仁 (Ren), and filial piety are crucial topics. The Chinese philosophical principle of 仁 (Ren), often translated as benevolence, kindness, or humaneness, is at the heart of Confucian philosophy. It represents the idea of treating others with compassion, empathy, and respect, and is considered the

foundation of good relationships and moral conduct. In Confucian societies, 仁 (Ren) is not just an abstract concept—it is a guiding principle for how people behave in their families, communities, and everyday interactions. Confucianism holds that junzi (gentlemen) involved in politics must fulfil the virtues of benevolence, justice, loyalty and trustworthiness, while *xiaoren* (ordinary people) are only expected to do their filial duty within the family (Gong, 2025; Hung, 2017, 2019, 2024; Juan, Shih & Kao, 2025; Kristina Preidyte, 2024; Ministry of Education, 2017).

### 3. Learning Themes for Young Children: Reflections Derived from Confucius's Educational Philosophy of "Benevolence(仁)"

The learning themes in preschools include multicultural education, life education, moral education, aesthetic education, and environmental education. The foundation of these learning themes is based on Confucius's educational philosophy of "benevolence(Ren)"( 仁 ). Through the implementation of the preschool curriculum, children are nurtured to develop a benevolent heart. They can appreciate and respect their own and others' lives and cultures; they can exhibit ethical behavior, care for their living environment, and appreciate and respond to the beauty of their surroundings. In addition, Confucius's philosophy emphasizes respect and care in interpersonal relationships, which aligns closely with the core values of multicultural education, life education, moral education, aesthetic education, and environmental education (Juan, Shih & Kao, 2025; Ministry of Education, 2017; Shih, 2024).

#### 3.1. Multicultural education

Multicultural education has long been promoted in Taiwan, but the difficulty of its implementation is the lack of multicultural environment in schools. Therefore, how to increase teachers' understanding of the learning content of multiculturalism under limited resources to promote multicultural education is on the agenda in the current reform of Taiwan's school curriculum. In order to improve the effectiveness of the school's multicultural education practice, the textbook also incorporates the concept of multicultural education, hoping to enhance children's respect for different cultures. Because childhood is a crucial period of development and the best stage to implement education. At this stage, the meaning of ethnicity, language, gender, religion and class can be taught to children. Confucius's philosophy of benevolence can help children understand and respect peers from different cultural backgrounds, fostering multicultural inclusivity (Banks, 2013; Juan, Shih & Kao, 2025; Ministry of Education, 2017; Shih, 2020d, 2024; Wu, 2024).

#### 3.2 Life education

Life education for young children is an important element of education in Taiwan. This kind of education is centered on life care and allows young children to understand the meaning of life and to respect and cherish life. Once, Confucius said while discussing the idea of Benevolence with his students: "When it comes to the matters of Benevolence, you should not act humble in front of the teachers. You should fight for the first place without delay." We should therefore strive to be exemplary in practicing Benevolence. Confucius also taught that cultivating Benevolence helps when facing hardship and distress, e.g. living in material poverty for a long time. Similarly, people who do not cultivate Benevolence cannot achieve a peaceful life for a long time. On the other hand, those who are guided by Benevolence always regard it as the greatest happiness in life. According to Confucius teachings, a wise person views Benevolence as the most beneficial life norm (Confucius Institute Blog, 2026; Juan, Shih & Kao, 2025; Liu, Luo & Pang, 2026; Liu, Luo, Pang, 2026; Ministry of Education, 2017; Shih, 2020, 2024; Shih, Wu & Chung, 2022; Wu, 2022a, 2022b). The spirit of benevolence promoted by Confucius helps children cherish their own lives and the lives of others, cultivating a sense of respect and gratitude for life.

#### 3.3 Moral education

We want our children to be honest. We want them to respect those different from themselves. We want them to make responsible decisions in their lives. We want them to care about their families, communities and themselves. These things do not happen on their own . . . Character education helps students to develop important qualities such as justice, diligence, compassion, respect, and courage, and to understand why it is important to live by them. Early childhood is a period of rapid development and growth, and regardless of physical, psychological, and social abilities, young children at this stage have great plasticity and strong imitation ability. Childhood is a critical period for individual learning; so preschool teachers must provide young children with appropriate moral education at this time. Benevolence is central to moral education, teaching children how to demonstrate ethical behavior in daily life, respect others, and build correct values. Finally, most studies on teaching strategies for moral education recommend a problem-based approach to instruction whereby students work in small groups. This approach gives room for dialogue and interaction between students, which is considered to be crucial for their moral and prosocial development (Chan, 2020; Juan, Shih & Kao, 2025; Ministry of Education, 2017; Schuitema, Dam & Veugelers, 2008; Shih, 2022, 2024).

#### 3.4. Aesthetic education

In Taiwan, for example, the Natural Way Kindergartens are based on the talents of human beings. Stemming from the

cultural aesthetics of Eastern philosophy and the evolution of human consciousness and the civilization process, with education centered on both educators and learners. Learning, knowledge and educational practice strive to let children understand, think, imagine, and create from practice and experience, thereby cultivating sensory memory, intelligence, and ability that children can internalize. These kindergartens cultivate children's concern for people, society, and nature (Chao, Lin, Tu & Wu, 2023; Juan, Shih & Kao, 2025; Ministry of Education, 2017; Shih, 2020b, 2020c, 2024). Confucius's emphasis on inner virtue can be combined with children's appreciation of the beauty in their environment, helping them gain more inspiration in art and aesthetics.

### 3.5 Environmental education

The urgency of addressing environmental issues has gained momentum, particularly in light of global warming, biodiversity loss, and increasing ecological degradation. As these crises deepen, the role of education in shaping environmentally conscious individuals becomes increasingly vital. Environmental education emerges as a crucial avenue for fostering not only knowledge, but also the values, attitudes, and behaviors essential for supporting a sustainable future. However, the success of this education depends on how well it translates into practical, everyday ecological intelligence (Chen & Wu, 2024; Juan, Shih & Kao, 2025; Ministry of Education, 2017; Safitri, Sujarwo, Marini et al., 2026; Shih, 2024). Confucius's spirit of benevolence can also extend to caring for the natural environment, encouraging children to protect the environment and cherish natural resources.

## 4. CONCLUSION

Through this curriculum framework, children are encouraged to cultivate an appreciation for the aesthetic dimensions of life and to engage in social interactions characterized by effectiveness and empathy. Accordingly, the framework foregrounds life education, multicultural education, aesthetic education, and moral education as foundational dimensions underpinning the holistic development of young children. Furthermore, the curriculum framework functions as a significant pedagogical instrument for enriching children's learning experiences and fostering meaningful knowledge construction. This study offers a philosophical interrogation of the learning themes embedded within Taiwan's Early Childhood Education and Care Curriculum Framework, drawing upon Confucius's concept of benevolence (Ren, 仁) as a central analytical lens. By situating contemporary curriculum discourse within a Confucian ethical and philosophical tradition, this analysis seeks to illuminate the cultural, moral, and epistemological foundations of early childhood education in Taiwan. It is argued that such a perspective not only contributes to the theoretical advancement of curriculum studies but also broadens young children's learning horizons, thereby enhancing the quality, cultural relevance, and pedagogical depth of early childhood education in Taiwan (Hung, 2013; Juan, Shih & Kao, 2025; Ministry of Education, 2017; Shih, 2024).

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