

# Exploring the Influence of Empathy and Cultural Diversity on Curriculum Development in Early Childhood Education

Ni Jiajun<sup>1</sup>, Datuk Dr. Yasmin Binti Hussain<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1,2</sup>Faculty of Education and Liberal Studies, City University, 46100 Petaling Jaya, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

\*Corresponding Author Email: dryasmin.hussain@city.edu.my

To Link this Article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBS/v15-i7/26060> DOI:10.6007/IJARBS/v15-i7/26060

*Published Date:* 22 July 2025

## Abstract

This study explores the influence of teachers' social awareness—specifically empathy and cultural diversity—on early childhood curriculum development in China. Method, A structured questionnaire was administered to 260 preschool teachers in Zhejiang Province, measuring four sub-dimensions: emotional understanding, emotional expression, cultural integration, and cross-cultural interaction. Pearson correlation and multiple regression analyses were conducted. Results, Both empathy and cultural diversity positively predicted curriculum development. Behavioral dimensions—emotional expression and cross-cultural interaction—had the strongest effects, indicating that observable social behaviors are closely linked to curriculum enhancement. A strong correlation between empathy and cultural diversity also suggests an integrated structure within teachers' social awareness. Conclusion: These findings highlight the critical role of teachers' social awareness in promoting inclusive and humanistic early childhood curricula. The study offers practical implications for teacher training and curriculum reform in the Chinese educational context.

**Keywords:** Empathy, Cultural Diversity, Social Awareness, Curriculum Development Preschool Teachers

## Introduction

In the era of accelerating globalization and increasing cultural interconnectivity, the ability to foster social-emotional competencies in young children is no longer an educational luxury but a foundational necessity. As societies increasingly emphasize the holistic development of young children, Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) has emerged as a global priority in early childhood education, shaping both curriculum reform and policy-making agendas. Research has shown that strong socio-emotional competencies not only support children's positive self-concept, but also enhance their emotional regulation, interpersonal relationships, and problem-solving abilities (Roth & Erbacher, 2021; Andrade & Carvalho, 2024). Emotional skills,

in particular, have been linked to improved resilience, collaboration, academic achievement, and reduced behavioral problems (“Emotional and Social Development in Early Childhood Education,” 2024).

However, despite broad recognition of SEL's value, its practical integration into early childhood curricula—especially in the context of empathy and cultural diversity—remains underdeveloped, under-theorized, and insufficiently researched in many national education systems, including China's.

Among the multiple dimensions of SEL, social awareness stands out as a foundational construct. It involves children's sensitivity to others' emotional states, as well as their understanding and respect for social norms and cultural diversity—making it a critical reference point in curriculum design and educational evaluation (Collie, 2020).

In early childhood education, the teacher is not only a transmitter of knowledge, but a model of emotional and cultural responsiveness. Therefore, understanding how teachers' empathy and cultural awareness influence curriculum development is critical to advancing equitable, inclusive, and emotionally supportive learning environments.

The development of social awareness is grounded in two essential competencies: empathy and cultural diversity awareness. Empathy provides the foundation for perspective-taking and emotional understanding, enabling children to engage in prosocial behaviors and fostering cooperation and mutual support (Borges et al., 2019; Zhou et al., 2020). Classroom practices characterized by empathy can enhance students' social awareness by promoting appreciation for cultural differences (Rosepti, 2022). Meanwhile, cultural diversity awareness equips children to recognize and respect differences in language, religion, values, and lifestyles—an increasingly vital skill in today's globalized context.

In the post-pandemic era and amidst rapid societal change, cultivating these traits is more than a pedagogical goal—it is a social responsibility. Curricula that integrate social values and community engagement have been shown to significantly enhance children's respect for diversity and participation in social issues (Fitri et al., 2024). Early exposure to multicultural perspectives also plays a critical role in shaping children's sense of social responsibility and critical thinking capacities (Fitri et al., 2024).

Despite the growing consensus on the importance of social awareness, significant challenges remain in effectively embedding empathy and cultural diversity into the practical processes of curriculum development—especially at the early childhood level. For example, some preschool programs refer to emotional expression or cultural festivals in their activities, yet often lack coherent integration frameworks or culturally responsive pedagogies (Hyun, 2020). Moreover, teachers from different cultural backgrounds may exhibit varying understandings of social awareness and face diverse implementation barriers (Kim, 2022), highlighting the urgency and relevance of further empirical investigation.

From a practical perspective, this research is highly beneficial to multiple stakeholders: Teachers will gain evidence-based strategies for implementing social awareness in real classrooms; Curriculum designers can use the results to embed empathy

and diversity education systematically into early childhood programs ; Policymakers can base reforms in teacher training and curriculum evaluation on empirical findings, increasing the alignment between national goals and classroom realities.

Therefore, this study is both timely and necessary, as it fills an urgent gap by offering practical guidance and empirical evidence on how the core values of empathy and cultural diversity can be effectively translated into curriculum development processes in early childhood education.

Against this backdrop, the present study adopts a social awareness framework and focuses specifically on the two core dimensions of empathy and cultural diversity. Through a combination of literature analysis and empirical investigation, this study aims to examine how these dimensions shape the pathways and mechanisms of curriculum development in early childhood education. The research seeks to identify how empathy and cultural diversity are reflected in curriculum goals, content selection, teaching strategies, and evaluation systems, and to provide actionable strategies and policy recommendations for building a more inclusive, equitable, and responsive early childhood education system.

In sum, this study contributes meaningfully to both research and practice by addressing a critical need for integrating emotional and cultural competencies into early childhood education—a step that is essential not only for child development but for social cohesion and global citizenship.

### Literature Review

#### *The Current Landscape of Early Childhood Curriculum Development: Global and Chinese Perspectives*

Globally, the development of early childhood curricula has shown a clear shift from knowledge-centered models toward approaches that prioritize the holistic development of the child. Many national early childhood education frameworks have begun to incorporate **Social and Emotional Learning (SEL)**, **global competence**, and **culturally responsive education** as core components, aiming to promote the integrated growth of children's cognitive, emotional, and social skills (Dumbuya, 2025). SEL, in particular, fosters emotional regulation, empathy, and relationship-building—skills that are essential to a child's development (Dumbuya, 2025). For instance, Finland has embraced phenomenon-based learning and interdisciplinary instruction as central to its curriculum reform, emphasizing real-world contexts to cultivate children's social understanding and empathy (Ferreira, 2021). This approach reflects Finland's commitment to innovative educational practices and comprehensive teacher preparation. In the United States, programs such as **HighScope** and **Head Start** have actively integrated SEL into daily classroom routines, using methods like cooperative learning, role play, and emotional recognition to enhance children's social participation and emotional self-regulation (Roth & Erbacher, 2021). Meanwhile, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2021) has called for early childhood curricula worldwide to emphasize **cultural diversity** and **peace education**, particularly in response to increasing global migration and the need for social inclusion.

Despite these promising reforms, practical implementation still faces challenges such as curriculum fragmentation, inadequate teacher training, and the lack of robust evaluation

systems for emotional education. The integration of social awareness into curriculum structures remains uneven across countries, and while international experiences offer valuable insights, they are not always transferable to different sociocultural contexts. There is, therefore, a pressing need for **localized theoretical frameworks and empirical research**.

In China, early childhood education has also undergone a notable transformation—from an emphasis on academic knowledge to a broader focus on children's comprehensive competencies. The Ministry of Education's *Guidelines for the Learning and Development of Children Aged 3–6* (2012) explicitly stated that kindergartens should promote children's social development, including emotional expression, rule awareness, empathy, and cooperation (MOE, 2012). The *Guidelines for Evaluating the Quality of Kindergarten Care and Education (Trial)*, released in 2022, further emphasized the importance of respecting diversity and integrating multicultural values into the curriculum. These guidelines encouraged kindergartens to develop culturally relevant educational practices by drawing on local resources. In cities like Beijing, Shanghai, and Shenzhen, kindergartens have implemented activities such as cultural festivals, family heritage sharing, and traditional clothing experiences to promote cultural diversity in classroom settings.

However, despite growing policy support, the practical integration of these values into the curriculum still faces significant obstacles. On the one hand, curriculum structures in most kindergartens remain segmented by traditional learning domains, lacking a systematic integration of social-emotional content. On the other hand, many teachers have not received adequate training in relevant concepts or curriculum design, resulting in superficial or ceremonial activities that fail to foster deeper cultural understanding or social responsibility. In addition, stark disparities remain between urban and rural regions in terms of curriculum quality and access, raising ongoing concerns about educational equity.

Given these realities in both global and Chinese contexts, there is a critical need to explore how the core dimensions of **empathy** and **cultural diversity**—as essential aspects of social awareness—can be meaningfully embedded in early childhood curriculum development. Addressing this issue is of urgent importance for advancing both theoretical and practical work in the field of early childhood education.

#### *The Role and Value of Empathy in Early Childhood Curriculum*

Empathy is widely recognized as a core component of young children's social-emotional development and the foundation for prosocial behavior. It enables children to understand and respond to the emotions of others, while also fostering cooperation and conflict resolution skills (Fullchange, 2022). In recent years, curriculum interventions centered on empathy—such as the **Kindness Curriculum** and **SEL-integrated programs**—have yielded promising outcomes internationally. These programs have demonstrated that empathy education can significantly improve children's classroom behavior, peer relationships, and emotional regulation abilities (Li et al., 2024).

In China, as national educational priorities continue to emphasize moral education and the integration of multiple domains of development (often referred to as the “five educations in one” strategy), increasing attention is being paid to emotional learning and character development in preschool settings (Huang, 2023; Fan, 2023). Existing studies have shown that

teachers can intentionally guide children toward developing empathy and respect for others through practices such as picture book storytelling and structured emotional expression activities (Montoya et al., 2021).

However, several gaps remain in the current research. First, many empirical studies on empathy have focused predominantly on psychological measurement, offering descriptive statistics on children's empathy levels, but failing to explore how empathy is concretely embedded into **curriculum content, learning objectives, and teacher–child interactions**. Second, empathy education is often narrowly interpreted as a subcategory of either “emotional education” or “moral instruction,” which has led to a lack of systematic and structured pedagogical strategies in curriculum implementation. Moreover, within the Chinese early childhood education context, empirical analyses that examine the relationship between empathy development and curriculum design remain limited. There is a noticeable absence of **localized pedagogical models** and **scalable curriculum integration frameworks** that can effectively support empathy education in preschool classrooms.

### **The Role of Cultural Diversity Education in Early Childhood Education**

#### *Cultural Diversity Education*

plays a critical role in fostering inclusivity, cultural awareness, and global competence among young learners (Semila et al., 2025). Its aim is to create an environment where all children feel valued and respected, while simultaneously challenging stereotypes and biases (Semila et al., 2025). By cultivating critical thinking and cross-cultural communication skills, this approach helps prepare children to participate effectively in an increasingly globalized society (Williams & Soriero, 2021). At its core, it emphasizes an understanding of one's own cultural identity, the recognition and reconciliation of privilege, and the development of empathy and social responsibility. Within international education reform, multicultural education is regarded as a key pathway for developing children's global competence, with curricula designed to encourage appreciation of difference, understanding of diversity, and the cultivation of inclusive thinking (Darmawan & Mbura, 2024).

In the United States, for instance, the **Anti-Bias Education (ABE)** framework has been widely implemented in both teacher training and early childhood curriculum development. Research has shown that teaching strategies such as cultural celebrations, family heritage storytelling, and multilingual book reading can effectively enhance children's understanding of diverse cultures and foster cross-cultural communication skills (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2020).

In recent years, China has also placed greater emphasis on respecting difference and promoting cultural diversity through education policy. Notable efforts have emerged in preschools located in ethnic minority regions, multicultural urban communities, and international schools. For example, kindergartens in ethnic minority areas have introduced local elements such as traditional dance, ethnic costume experiences, and instruction in local languages to foster children's cultural identity and sense of belonging (Vong & Wei, 2023). In metropolitan cities, international kindergartens have adopted bilingual picture book reading and hosted “International Culture Days” to create culturally inclusive learning environments (Zhang, 2022). Nevertheless, research shows that many preschool teachers tend to hold a limited understanding of cultural diversity and may not recognize it as an explicit educational objective. Although picture books are increasingly used to teach about diversity, teachers

often rely on selective and surface-level approaches, occasionally supplemented by direct experiential activities (Zhang, 2023).

Despite these developments, the understanding and implementation of cultural diversity education in China remain relatively underdeveloped. First, instructional content often focuses only on surface-level cultural expressions—such as festivals and clothing—while neglecting deeper layers of cultural values and worldviews. Second, most teachers lack training in multicultural pedagogy and cultural sensitivity, making it difficult to support children in meaningfully engaging with cultural differences. Third, disparities in curriculum resources and the absence of systematic assessment frameworks further hinder the consistent implementation of cultural education.

Taken together, both in international and Chinese contexts, **empathy and cultural diversity**—as two core dimensions of social awareness—hold significant value for early childhood curricula. They contribute meaningfully to children’s socio-emotional development, cultural understanding, and collaborative capacities. However, several research gaps remain. First, most existing studies focus on developmental outcomes or isolated teaching activities, lacking a theoretical framework that integrates empathy and cultural diversity systematically into curriculum structures. Second, empirical research in China is still limited, with unclear pathways for curriculum integration, insufficient teacher capacity, and underdeveloped training systems. Third, little is known about the **interactive relationship** between empathy and cultural diversity, and a cohesive model for integrated curriculum development is yet to be established.

Therefore, this study aims to address the aforementioned gaps by systematically exploring the mechanisms through which empathy and cultural diversity influence early childhood curriculum development. It seeks to construct a socially aware curriculum integration pathway that is both contextually grounded in China and aligned with international perspectives, thereby providing theoretical support and practical guidance for building an inclusive and culturally responsive early childhood education system.

## **Methodology**

### *Research Design*

This study adopted a quantitative research design, utilizing a structured questionnaire to investigate the impact of empathy and cultural diversity—two core dimensions of social awareness—on curriculum development in early childhood education. Correlation analysis and multiple regression analysis were employed as the main statistical methods to identify the relationships among key variables and assess their predictive effects.

### *Participants*

The participants were early childhood education (ECE) teachers from Zhejiang Province, China. A stratified sampling method was used to ensure representativeness across gender, age, and years of teaching experience. A total of 260 valid responses were collected. Among them, 81.54% were female and 18.46% were male, which is consistent with the current gender distribution in the early childhood education profession.

*Instruments*

A self-developed structured questionnaire was used to collect data. The design of the scale was informed by validated instruments in educational and psychological research both in China and internationally. The questionnaire included five dimensions of social awareness (e.g., emotional understanding, emotional expression, cultural diversity, social communication, and self-management), along with several items measuring aspects of curriculum development in early childhood education. All items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). To ensure internal consistency, Cronbach's alpha coefficients were calculated for each subscale. All subscales achieved reliability coefficients above the 0.70 threshold, indicating good internal consistency. Specifically, the emotional understanding dimension had an alpha of 0.843, and the cultural diversity dimension had an alpha of 0.861.

**Research Results***Descriptive Statistical Analysis of Sample Information*

To ensure the scientificity and representativeness of the research results, this paper conducted a descriptive statistical analysis of the basic information of 260 valid samples, and the results are shown in Table 4.1.

Table 4-1

*Descriptive statistical analysis of the sample*

Category	Group	Percentage
gender	man	18.46%
	woman	81.54%
age	Under 25 years old	8.47%
	26-30 years old	17.4%
	31-35 years old	30.02%
	36-40 years old	20.94%
	41-50 years old	19.94%
	51 years old and above	3.23%
academic degree	undergraduate course	13.78%
	master	58.93%
	doctor	27.29%
Monthly income	Below 5500 yuan/month	11.49%
	5501-7000 yuan/month	38.58%
	7001-9000 yuan/month	26.85%
	9001-10000 yuan/month	16.85%
	More than 10001 yuan/month	6.23%
working life	Less than 1 year	2.69%
	1-3 years	5.77%
	4-6 years	14.16%
	7 to 10 years	16.17%
	11-20 years	45.8%
	More than 21 years	15.41%

Based on the above table, the sample in this study demonstrates strong representativeness, providing a solid empirical foundation for examining the relationship between social awareness and early childhood curriculum development.

To begin with, the **gender distribution** reveals a significant imbalance: female teachers account for 81.54% of the sample, while male teachers comprise only 18.46%. This pattern is consistent with the gender composition of China's early childhood education workforce, where women overwhelmingly dominate the profession (Liu Yan, 2022). Such gender asymmetry reflects the traditional division of labor in the preschool education sector and may influence how teachers engage with core dimensions of social awareness such as emotional understanding and cultural diversity—an area warranting further investigation.

Regarding **age structure**, the sample is concentrated among mid-career educators aged 31 to 40, with 31–35-year-olds accounting for 30.02% and 36–40-year-olds for 20.94%, totaling over 50%. This age group is generally considered to be in the prime of their professional development, possessing both practical teaching experience and educational sensitivity. Their openness to pedagogical reform and curriculum innovation provides a favorable foundation for the implementation of socially responsive curricula.

In terms of **educational background**, the respondents are highly educated: 58.93% hold a master's degree, 27.29% a doctoral degree, and only 13.78% have a bachelor's degree or below. This indicates a high level of academic attainment across the sample, suggesting strong professional knowledge and theoretical understanding—qualities that are essential for meaningful engagement with curriculum development and social awareness education.

As for **income levels**, the majority of participants fall within a mid-range monthly income bracket. Specifically, 38.58% earn between 5,501 and 7,000 RMB, 26.85% earn between 7,001 and 9,000 RMB, and 16.85% fall in the 9,001 to 10,000 RMB range. This income distribution reflects the current compensation structure for early childhood educators in the region and may influence their motivation and capacity to actively participate in curriculum reform.

Finally, the **teaching experience profile** reveals that most participants are seasoned educators. Those with 11–20 years of teaching experience constitute the largest group (45.80%), while those with more than 21 years account for 15.41%, together exceeding 60% of the sample. This suggests that the majority of participants possess extensive practical experience and the capacity to contribute meaningfully to curriculum development and pedagogical innovation. Their insights are likely to enhance the applicability and practicality of social awareness integration in early childhood curricula.

In sum, the sample demonstrates balanced representation across key demographic variables—gender, age, educational attainment, income, and teaching experience—making it a reliable basis for investigating how social awareness influences curriculum development. The structure of the sample not only reflects the current composition of China's early childhood teaching workforce but also provides a robust demographic and contextual foundation for empirical inquiry into curriculum integration strategies.

*Analysis of Correlation Coefficients between Emotional Understanding and Cultural Diversity*  
In order to explore the relationship between different dimensions of social consciousness and early childhood education curriculum development, the Pearson correlation coefficient ( $r$ ) was used for analysis. The analysis results are shown in Tables 4.2 and 4.2.1. Both emotional understanding and cultural diversity variables are significantly positively correlated with the

curriculum development variable, and both have reached a high degree of statistical significance ( $p < 0.001$ ).

#### 4-2 Pearson Correlation Matrix of Emotional Understanding and Cultural Diversity

Variable	Variable	Emotional Understanding	Cultural diversity
variable	1.000	-	-
Emotional Understanding	.505***	1.000	-
Cultural diversity	.541***	.581***	1.000

#### 4-3 Summary of Pearson Correlations with Social Awareness Indicators

Variable	Pearson (r)	p
Emotional Understanding	0.475	$p < 0.001$
Cultural Diversity	0.480	$p < 0.001$

According to the results presented in the table, both **emotional understanding** and **cultural diversity** exhibit **moderate positive correlations** with curriculum development, with all correlations reaching a high level of statistical significance ( $p < 0.001$ ). These findings suggest that both dimensions may play a critical role in shaping early childhood curricula.

Specifically, the correlation coefficient between emotional understanding and curriculum development is  $r = 0.475$  ( $p < 0.001$ ), indicating that teachers with stronger empathic abilities in the domain of social awareness are more likely to design curricula that respond to children's emotional growth and social interaction needs. Such sensitivity can enhance the humanistic qualities and social adaptability embedded within the curriculum.

The correlation between cultural diversity and curriculum development is  $r = 0.480$  ( $p < 0.001$ ), suggesting that teachers with higher levels of cultural sensitivity are more inclined to incorporate cross-cultural and inclusive elements into their curricular planning. This approach supports the development of children's cultural cognition and their ability to adapt to diverse social environments.

Moreover, emotional understanding and cultural diversity themselves show a strong positive correlation ( $r = 0.581$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), implying that these two dimensions may evolve in tandem and reinforce one another within the broader structure of teachers' social awareness. Their interaction could collectively influence the direction and quality of curriculum development. These findings provide further empirical support for the research hypothesis that the core elements of social awareness—**empathy** and **cultural diversity awareness**—play essential and constructive roles in the development of early childhood curricula.

#### *Regression Analysis of Empathy and Cultural Diversity within Teachers' Social Awareness*

To further explore the impact of the two core dimensions of teachers' social awareness—empathy and cultural diversity—on early childhood curriculum development, this study constructed four multiple linear regression models (M1-1, M1-2, M2-1, and M2-2). The results are presented in the table below.

Table 4-4

*Multiple Linear Regression Models of Empathy and Cultural Diversity within Teachers' Social Awareness*

Variables	M1-1	M1-2	M2-1	M2-2
Age	-0.083	-0.040	0.044	0.053
Level of education	0.035	0.024	0.028	0.050
Working life	0.107	0.084	0.006	-0.008
Teachers' emotional understanding	<b>0.406*</b>	—	—	—
Teachers' emotional expression	—	<b>0.445*</b>	—	—
Cultural integration	—	—	<b>0.455*</b>	—
Cross-cultural interaction	—	—	—	<b>0.480*</b>
R <sup>2</sup>	0.208	0.304	0.278	0.381
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.192	0.289	0.264	0.369
F (variance ratio)	<b>12.934*</b>	<b>21.444*</b>	<b>18.985*</b>	<b>30.317*</b>

Note: M1-1=Emotional Understanding; M1-2=Emotional Expression; M2-1=Cultural Integration; M2-2=Cross-cultural Interaction

Based on the regression results presented above, the **impact of teachers' empathy** (Model M1) was analyzed through two sub-models. **Model M1-1**, which takes *emotional understanding* as the core predictor variable, shows a significant positive effect on curriculum development ( $\beta = 0.406, p < 0.001$ ). After controlling for age, level of education, and years of teaching experience, the model yields a coefficient of determination  $R^2 = 0.208$ , with an adjusted  $R^2$  of 0.192. The regression model as a whole is statistically significant ( $F = 12.934, p < 0.001$ ), indicating that teachers with stronger abilities to understand others' emotions are more likely to actively contribute to curriculum development.

**Model M1-2** focuses on *emotional expression* as the independent variable. The regression coefficient is  $\beta = 0.445 (p < 0.001)$ , demonstrating an even stronger predictive effect. This model explains more variance, with  $R^2 = 0.304$  and an adjusted  $R^2$  of 0.289, suggesting that teachers who are more expressive in conveying emotions during instruction tend to have a more pronounced positive impact on curriculum development outcomes.

Regarding the **influence of cultural diversity** (Model M2), **Model M2-1** includes *cultural integration* as the key predictor. It shows a significant positive effect on curriculum development ( $\beta = 0.455, p < 0.001$ ), indicating that teachers who integrate multicultural elements into the learning environment are important contributors to building inclusive curricula. This model's  $R^2$  is 0.278, with an adjusted  $R^2$  of 0.264, and the overall model is statistically significant ( $F = 18.985, p < 0.001$ ).

**Model M2-2**, which incorporates *cross-cultural interaction* as the predictor, yields the strongest explanatory power among all four models ( $\beta = 0.480$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), with  $R^2 = 0.381$  and adjusted  $R^2 = 0.369$  ( $F = 30.317$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). This result suggests that when teachers actively encourage cultural exchange and intercultural dialogue among children during instruction, the overall quality and depth of curriculum development are significantly enhanced.

Across all four models, the control variables—*age*, *educational level*, and *teaching experience*—did not reach statistical significance. However, in certain models, *teaching experience* showed a slight positive trend in predicting curriculum development, as in M1-1 ( $\beta = 0.107$ ).

In summary, the results across the four models consistently indicate that both **empathy** and **cultural diversity**, along with their respective subdimensions, have significant positive predictive effects on early childhood curriculum development. Notably, *cross-cultural interaction* and *emotional expression* demonstrate the strongest explanatory power, underscoring the importance of enhancing teachers' behavioral expressions of social awareness and their practical abilities in facilitating cultural engagement within educational settings.

## Discussion

This study examined the influence of two core dimensions of social awareness—**empathy** and **cultural diversity**—on early childhood curriculum development. Based on the statistical analysis of questionnaire data from 260 preschool teachers, the results indicate that both empathy (particularly **emotional expression**) and cultural diversity (especially **cross-cultural interaction**) exert significant positive effects on curriculum development. These findings confirm the critical role of social awareness in shaping early childhood curricula.

Notably, the subdimensions of *cross-cultural interaction* and *emotional expression* demonstrated the strongest explanatory power within their respective domains. This suggests that **how teachers enact social awareness through practice—particularly by expressing emotions and fostering intercultural engagement—constitutes a key pathway for enhancing curriculum quality.**

The study also revealed a close relationship between empathy and cultural diversity, indicating a high degree of **structural interdependence** within teachers' social awareness. These two competencies are not isolated traits; rather, they **mutually reinforce one another** and jointly contribute to building emotionally responsive and culturally inclusive curricula. Furthermore, control variables such as **age**, **educational level**, and **teaching experience** were not found to significantly influence curriculum development. This implies that the **quality of teachers' social awareness** is more decisive for curriculum innovation than demographic or professional background factors.

In summary, this study establishes an initial **empirical linkage between social awareness and curriculum development**, validating the theoretical assumptions proposed earlier. These findings offer practical evidence for further discussions on the structure of teachers' social awareness, strategies for curriculum integration, and the priorities for teacher professional development.

*Theoretical Foundations and Integration Mechanisms of Social Awareness Dimensions in Curriculum Development*

This study confirms the significant role of the two key dimensions of social awareness—**empathy** and **cultural diversity**—in shaping early childhood curriculum development. The findings are consistent with existing international research and also provide theoretical grounding and practical pathways for constructing socially aware curricula in the Chinese context. The theoretical analysis is presented through two subthemes below.

*Empathy: An Emotional Bridge for Promoting Humanistic Curriculum Values*

Empathy, defined as the ability to understand and respond to the emotions of others, is a core component within the **Social and Emotional Learning (SEL)** framework (Paolini, 2020). The present study demonstrates that both **emotional understanding** and **emotional expression** significantly contribute to curriculum development. Notably, **emotional expression**, as the observable behavioral manifestation of empathy, showed stronger predictive power. This suggests that teachers' ability to translate empathic feelings into concrete teaching practices (Seo & Jang, 2024) serves as a vital mechanism for guiding the curriculum toward a more humanistic orientation.

This conclusion is supported by previous studies indicating that teachers' sensitivity to children's emotional cues directly influences their classroom engagement and social interactions (Liu & Wang, 2022; Poulou & Denham, 2022). Teachers with strong empathic capacities are more likely to design activities that include empathic dialogues, emotional role-play, and other socially responsive interactions (Berlibayeva et al., 2024), thereby enhancing children's socio-emotional adaptability.

In the Chinese educational context, emotional education has long been treated as a secondary component of moral education and has often lacked a systematic framework and formal curricular status (Yuan, 2023; Liu, 2020). By employing quantitative modeling, this study empirically verifies the predictive power of empathy in curriculum development, offering support for repositioning empathy from a "supplementary activity" to a "structural design element" within the curriculum. This underscores the need to emphasize the development of **emotional expressiveness** in teacher professional training, ensuring that teaching is not only cognitively organized but also enriched with humanistic warmth.

*Cultural Diversity: A Driving Force for Inclusive and Globally-Oriented Curriculum Development*

As a key dimension of social awareness, **cultural diversity** emphasizes the importance of respecting and understanding differences in culture, language, and lifestyle. In this study, both *cultural integration* and *cross-cultural interaction* were found to significantly predict the level of curriculum development, with **cross-cultural interaction demonstrating the strongest explanatory power**. This finding suggests that in early childhood education, when teachers design multicultural learning materials or facilitate intercultural dialogue, they actively expand children's cultural cognition and significantly enhance the openness and responsiveness of the curriculum.

Theoretically, this result aligns closely with multicultural education theories such as those proposed by Aldrup et al. (2022), which emphasize that **culturally responsive teaching** is essential for achieving curriculum equity and educational inclusivity. Cultural sensitivity, as

the theory argues, should extend beyond knowledge acquisition and be embodied in teachers' instructional behaviors and classroom communication—resonating with the central role of *cross-cultural interaction* identified in this study.

Although China's early childhood education has gradually placed greater emphasis on the inheritance of traditional culture, the understanding of "cultural diversity" remains relatively narrow (Zhao, 2020). It is often limited to surface-level elements such as holiday celebrations and ethnic costumes, while deeper dimensions such as values, identity, and intercultural understanding are overlooked (Zhang, 2020). The strong predictive effect of *cross-cultural interaction* on curriculum development found in this study highlights the need for educators to move beyond "cultural representation" toward "**cultural exchange**", thereby shifting the focus of early childhood curricula from localized identity to the cultivation of **global competence**.

#### *The Synergistic Mechanism Between Dimensions of Social Awareness*

This study also found a strong positive correlation between empathy and cultural diversity ( $r = 0.581$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), suggesting that these two components of social awareness are not isolated within teachers' cognitive frameworks, but rather **highly integrated and mutually reinforcing**. This finding aligns with the perspective of social constructivism, which posits that children's social learning stems from **meaningful interactions with others**. Teachers, as facilitators of such interactions, must possess both empathic understanding and cultural awareness in order to create truly child-centered and socially responsive curriculum environments.

From a theoretical standpoint, the two dimensions of social awareness **function as reciprocal supports** in practice. Empathy enhances teachers' sensitivity to cultural differences, while cultural diversity awareness broadens the scope of empathic engagement. This dual-pathway mechanism—**emotional and cultural**—offers a more nuanced conceptual logic for curriculum development and provides an integrative direction for both teacher training and curriculum design.

#### *The Integrated Mechanism of Teachers' Social Awareness in Curriculum Development*

This study not only confirmed the significant individual effects of two core dimensions of social awareness—empathy and cultural diversity—on early childhood curriculum development, but also revealed a strong interrelationship between them. This finding suggests that teachers' social awareness is not composed of isolated abilities, but rather constitutes a multidimensional, dynamic, and interactive cognitive structure. Its holistic impact far exceeds the linear effect of any single dimension. This integrated mechanism is of great theoretical and practical significance for understanding teachers' curriculum decision-making behaviors, strategies of curricular integration, and the formation of educational culture.

From the data perspective, the correlation coefficient between emotional understanding and cultural diversity reached  $r = 0.581$  ( $p < 0.001$ ), indicating that teachers with high levels of empathy often demonstrate strong cultural sensitivity and multicultural awareness. This positive correlation reflects not only a cognitive and value-level alignment between the two, but also suggests that emotional understanding and cultural responsiveness frequently co-

occur in teaching practice, jointly influencing curriculum design and instructional decisions. For instance, a teacher with strong emotional expression skills is more likely to show openness, inclusiveness, and thoughtfulness when working with families or students from culturally diverse backgrounds, and thus tends to incorporate elements of diversity into the content and strategies of their teaching.

From a theoretical perspective, this synergy can be interpreted as a form of “functional coupling” within the teacher’s social awareness system. According to the sociocultural perspective, cognitive development is deeply rooted in emotional engagement and cultural context within social interactions (Guo et al., 2023). Teachers’ expressions of empathy and cultural responsiveness during curriculum implementation are not merely emotional reactions or attitudes, but represent comprehensive judgments involving knowledge selection, contextual design, and value orientation. Therefore, when teachers are able to cognitively integrate emotional understanding and cultural diversity, they are better positioned to construct curricula that fulfill both humanistic and social goals.

Moreover, this integrated mechanism is reflected in the regression models of this study. Although empathy and cultural diversity were modeled as separate predictors, behavioral dimensions (emotional expression and cross-cultural interaction) consistently outperformed cognitive dimensions (emotional understanding and cultural integration) in terms of explanatory power (Kerkhoff & Cloud, 2020). This further supports the notion that teachers’ social awareness does not reside merely in perception or attitude, but is embodied through specific teaching behaviors and reinforced through a continuous cognitive–behavioral cycle in practice.

From the perspective of teacher professional development, these findings offer important implications. Traditional teacher training programs often isolate “emotional education” from “cultural education,” treating them respectively as moral instruction and multicultural curriculum. However, this study highlights that the two are in fact complementary components within the integrated structure of teachers’ social awareness. Thus, future teacher education should emphasize the integrative development of social awareness, with particular focus on strengthening the ability to transform empathy and cultural respect into responsive teaching actions within context (Wang, 2025). Training program design should move beyond the notion of “single-dimension empowerment” and instead establish a dual-pathway curricular framework grounded in both emotional and cultural dimensions. Such a framework would support teachers in achieving the practical ideals of “teaching as care” and “curriculum as culture.”

In summary, the integrated function of teachers’ social awareness in curriculum development is reflected not only in variable-level correlations but also in the deep influence it exerts on curriculum philosophy, content selection, and teacher–child interactions in practice. Understanding and strengthening this integrated mechanism will be a crucial breakthrough in building a high-quality and inclusive early childhood education system.

### **Limitations of the Study**

Although this study has made meaningful progress in theoretical construction, empirical analysis, and practical implications for early childhood education, several limitations must be

acknowledged. These limitations not only define the boundaries of the current research but also indicate important directions for future exploration and refinement.

In terms of sample scope and representativeness, the participants in this study were limited to early childhood educators from Zhejiang Province, China. While stratified sampling was employed to enhance the structural representativeness of the sample, the geographic restriction remains a limitation. Zhejiang, as a region with relatively abundant educational resources and a higher level of teacher professionalization, may have educators who demonstrate stronger social awareness, more advanced curriculum understanding, and greater innovation capacity than those in other regions—particularly central and western provinces. Therefore, caution is required when generalizing the findings to broader national contexts.

Regarding variable measurement and instrument construction, although the questionnaire was developed based on established literature and underwent reliability testing, it remains a self-designed structured instrument that has not yet been widely validated in China or across cultural contexts. Specifically, the “cross-cultural interaction” subdimension under the cultural diversity category involves complex content that may be influenced by regional cultural backgrounds, language environments, and individual teacher experiences, potentially leading to measurement ambiguity. As such, future studies should focus on developing context-sensitive and theoretically robust social awareness instruments to improve measurement accuracy.

In conclusion, while this study offers valuable theoretical and methodological contributions, its limitations provide space for reflection and future improvement. Subsequent research may benefit from expanding the sample scope, incorporating longitudinal data, adopting mixed-methods designs, and enhancing both measurement tools and control mechanisms to further deepen our understanding of the relationship between teachers’ social awareness and curriculum development.

### **Conclusion**

This study, situated within the context of early childhood education in China, focused on two core dimensions of teachers’ social awareness—empathy and cultural diversity—and empirically examined their influence on curriculum development. The findings clearly indicate that teachers’ social awareness, particularly the externalized behaviors of emotional expression and cross-cultural interaction, plays a significant role in enhancing the inclusiveness, humanistic quality, and adaptability of early childhood curricula. By constructing multiple regression models and conducting correlation analysis, this study not only confirmed the relationship between social awareness and curriculum development but also revealed the synergistic mechanism between these two dimensions within the cognitive structure of teachers. It fills a notable gap in domestic research on this topic. The study emphasizes that future teacher education and curriculum reform should prioritize the integrated development of social awareness in order to guide early childhood curricula toward greater openness, diversity, and care.

In addition, although integrating social awareness into curriculum assessment systems is undoubtedly important, this study primarily focused on the relationship between variables at

the level of curriculum development. It did not explore in depth how teachers assess the development of empathy or cultural diversity in actual teaching practice. This aspect remains largely theoretical and policy-oriented. Future research should consider developing assessment tools or conducting classroom-based observational studies to better embed social awareness into the full cycle of curriculum implementation, feedback, and evaluation.

## References

- Aldrup, K., Carstensen, B., & Klusmann, U. (2022). Is Empathy the Key to Effective Teaching? A Systematic Review of Its Association with Teacher-Student Interactions and Student Outcomes. *Educational Psychology Review*, 34(3), 1177–1216. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10648-021-09649-y>
- Andrade, N. C., & De Carvalho, C. F. (2024). Stimulation and Neuropsychological Rehabilitation of Social and Emotional Skills in Childhood. In *Neuropsychological Interventions for Children - Volume 1* (pp. 151–168). [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-53586-4\\_11](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-53586-4_11)
- Berlibayeva, M., Abitova, G. T., Bekmagambetova, R. K., & Nurzhanova, S. (2024). Psychopedagogical conditions for forming emotional intelligence in preschool children through role-playing games. *Naukovij Visnik Užgorods'kogo Universitetu*. <https://doi.org/10.54919/physics/55.2024.119kl6>
- Borges, G. F., De Fátima Sousa Ramos, M., De Luz Vale-Dias, M., & Vaz-Rebelo, P. (2019). Pro-social behavior, empathy, interpersonal and trust beliefs on peers during adolescence: study of their relationship with a sample of 181 portuguese adolescents of the 3rd cycle (7<sup>o</sup>, 8<sup>o</sup> and 9<sup>o</sup> year of schooling). *International Journal of Developmental and Educational Psychology Revista INFAD De Psicología*, 2(1), 129. <https://doi.org/10.17060/ijodaep.2019.n1.v2.1415>
- Collie, R. J. (2020). Social and emotional competence: advancing understanding of what, for whom, and when. *Educational Psychology*, 40(6), 663–665. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01443410.2020.1775936>
- Darmawan, W., & Mbura, E. M. (2024). Pendidikan Multikultural untuk Pembentukan Karakter Anak: Membangun Jembatan Harmoni Antarbudaya di Era Kontenporer. *Visi Sosial Humaniora*, 5(1), 224–232. <https://doi.org/10.51622/vsh.v5i1.2324>
- Dumbuya, E. (2025). Integrating Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) into Curriculum Development: A Pathway to Holistic Education. *Available at SSRN*. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.5019755>
- Emotional and social development in early childhood education. (2024). In *Advances in early childhood and K-12 education* (pp. 217–242). <https://doi.org/10.4018/979-8-3693-0634-5.ch010>
- Fan, Z. (2023). The development and Innovation of Social-Emotional Learning in China. *Lecture Notes in Education Psychology and Public Media*, 10(1), 119–128. <https://doi.org/10.54254/2753-7048/10/20230132>
- Ferreira, J. M. (2021). Play-based learning and phenomenon-based learning in the Finnish Early Childhood Education. *Olhares & Trilhas*, 23(3), 1278–1306. <https://doi.org/10.14393/ot2021v23.n.3.58448>
- Fitri, M., Saurita, K., & Gusmaneli, G. (2024). Membangun Kesadaran Sosial Melalui pilar-pilar pendidikan: Peran sekolah dalam masyarakat. *Jurnal Ilmu Sosial, Humaniora Dan Seni*, 3(3), 864–870., 3(3), 864–870. <https://doi.org/10.62379/jishs.v3i3.2299>
- Fullchange, A. (2022). *Empathy*. Routledge eBooks, 217–229. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003013778-17>

- GUO, X., Zheng, H., RUAN, D., HU, D., Wang, Y., WANG, Y., & Raymond, C. (2023). Associations between empathy and negative affect: effect of emotion regulation. *Acta Psychologica Sinica*, 55(6), 892–892. <https://doi.org/10.3724/sp.j.1041.2023.00892>
- Huang, Y. (2023). Research on the concept and Implementation Strategies of Affective Education in Primary School Chinese curriculum. *Journal of Medicine and Health Science.*, 1(4), 59–61. <https://doi.org/10.62517/jmhs.202305413>
- Kerkhoff, S. N., & Cloud, M. E. (2020). Equipping teachers with globally competent practices: A mixed methods study on integrating global competence and teacher education. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 103(<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijer.2020.101629>), 101629. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijer.2020.101629>
- Kim, H. (2022). Toward Culturally Responsive Social-Emotional Learning (SEL). In *Advances in educational marketing, administration, and leadership book series* (pp. 44–65). <https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-6684-5705-4.ch003>
- Li, Z., Li, B., Tsou, Y., Frijns, J. H. M., Meng, Q., Yuen, S., Wang, L., Liang, W., & Rieffe, C. (2024). Empathy Development in Preschoolers With/Without Hearing Loss and Its Associations with Social-Emotional Functioning. *Research on Child and Adolescent Psychopathology*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10802-024-01271-0>
- Liu, H. (2020). A brief discussion on emotional education in junior high school Chinese teaching. *International Education Forum*, 2(5), 84. <https://doi.org/10.32629/jief.v2i5.1417>
- Liu, M. H., & Wang, Q. (2022). Research on the Impact of the Emotional Expression of Kindergarten Teachers on Children: From the Perspective of the Class Micro-Power Relationship. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.808847>
- Mandelli, R. R., Tonetto, L. M., Lorenz, B. A., Meyer, G. E. C., & Marin, A. (2022). Game design guidelines to foster empathic behaviours in school-age children. *Design Journal*, 25(4), 577–595. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14606925.2022.2083364>
- Montoya, M. M., Martínez, M. P., Alonso, A. R., & Alonso, J. M. R. (2021). Educación emocional y centros de interés: cómo trabajar las emociones en educación infantil. *South Florida Journal of Development*, 2(2), 1750–1768. <https://doi.org/10.46932/sfjdv2n2-050>
- Paolini, A. C. (2020). Social Emotional Learning: Key to Career Readiness. *Anatolian Journal of Education*, 5(1), 125–134. <https://doi.org/10.29333/AJE.2020.5112A>
- Poulou, M., & Denham, S. A. (2022). Teachers' Emotional Expressiveness and Coping Reactions to Students' Emotions: Associations with Students' Social-Emotional Competences and School Adjustment. *Early Education and Development*, 34(3), 607–625. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10409289.2022.2053486>
- Rosepti, P. (2022). Cultivating Children's Social Awareness in the Multicultural and Diverse Community: A Perspective from Empathetic Teaching. *Eduksos Jurnal Pendidikan Sosial & Ekonomi*, 11(2). <https://doi.org/10.24235/edueksos.v11i2.11210>
- Roth, J. C., & Erbacher, T. A. (2021). Social and Emotional Learning (SEL). In *Routledge eBooks* (pp. 263–280). <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003150510-18>
- Roth, J. C., & Erbacher, T. A. (2021b). Social and Emotional Learning (SEL). In *Routledge eBooks* (pp. 263–280). <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003150510-18>
- Semila, C. E., Señal, N. P. L., & Baculio, J. K. V. (2025). The Roles of Multicultural Education: A research article on promoting inclusivity, cultural awareness, and global preparedness. *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science*, VIII(XII), 1575–1577. <https://doi.org/10.47772/ijriss.2024.8120133>

- Seo, E., & Jang, S. O. (2024). The Effect of Early Childhood Teachers' Play Sensitivity, Teaching Creativity, and Professional Support Environment on Teacher-Young Children Interaction. *Korean Association For Learner-Centered Curriculum And Instruction*, 24(24), 669–689. <https://doi.org/10.22251/jlcci.2024.24.24.669>
- Vong, K. I. P., & Wei, B. (2023). Constructing an ethnic minority culture-enriched kindergarten curriculum in southwest China: the role of teacher agency. *Compare a Journal of Comparative and International Education*, 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057925.2023.2292524>
- Wang, C. (2025). The Implications of Teachers' Pedagogical Sensitivity and Its Cultivation in the Perspective of Embodied Cognition. *Yixin Publisher*, 3(3), 1–9. <https://doi.org/10.59825/jet.2025.3.3.1>
- Wang, T. (2020). Cultural diversity and educational policy in Chinese society. *City Diversity*, 1(1). <https://doi.org/10.54517/cd.v1i1.1926>
- Williams, T., & Soriero, M. A. (2021). Creating global citizens through multicultural education. In *Advances in educational technologies and instructional design book series* (pp. 177–194). <https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-7998-7649-6.ch009>
- Yuan, Y. (2023). The Teacher Works with the Mind and the Learner with the Heart: Emotional Education into the Campus. *Education Study*, 5(4), 562–570. <https://doi.org/10.35534/es.0504082>
- Zhang, T. (2020). The “growth” of kindergarten-based festival curriculum. *Educational Science Development*, 2(11), 30–32. <https://doi.org/10.36012/sde.v2i11.2315>
- Zhang, X. (2022). The Evaluation of the Cultural Diversity Effect by Using Picture Books with a Preschool Teacher. *Mobile Information Systems*, 2022, 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1155/2022/6338221>
- Zhao, J. (2020). Reflections on integrating regional culture into early childhood curriculum. *Educational Research*, 3(1). <https://doi.org/10.32629/er.v3i1.2382>