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## Article

# Constructing the Early-Stage Framework of Cultural Identity Enlightenment in Heritage Education

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**Abstract:** Education and heritage are fundamental to achieving sustainable development goals. Integrating heritage into education is crucial for cultivating children's connection to heritage and promoting sustainable development. However, the lack of a scientific framework to guide educational goals across age groups results in unclear integration. This study aims to develop a framework for cultural identity enlightenment within heritage education by conducting literature research and validating it through field observations in kindergartens. It identifies cognitive, emotional and behavioral dimensions, outlining the developmental trajectory of these goals. This framework illustrates how children's understanding progresses from direct experiences to deeper appreciation and creative involvement. It provides teachers with a tool to set goals that empower children as agents, fostering the emergence of cultural awareness and identity. This approach not only enhances cultural identity but also supports sustainable development by advancing the transmission and innovation of cultural heritage.

**Keywords:** cultural identity enlightenment framework; heritage education for early years; sustainable development goals; goal system construction

## 1. Introduction

### *1.1. Enhancing sustainability through Heritage Education: Strengthening the Connection between People and Their Heritage*

The 2030 Agenda, adopted by the United Nation General Assembly, emphasizes the role of heritage in sustainability, particularly within the Sustainable Development Goal 11 - "Sustainable Cities and Communities". Over recent decades, there has been an increasing acknowledgment of the critical role that cultural heritage preservation plays in promoting sustainability [1]. The process of identifying, protecting, conserving, presenting, and transmitting cultural heritage to future generations not only directly contributes to sustainable development but also represents more sustainable patterns of land use, consumption, and production. Heritage, developed over centuries through gradual adaptation between communities and their environments, embodies these sustainable practices, moreover, heritage is vital to individual spiritual well-being due to its symbolic and aesthetic values [2]. Collectively, these aspects highlight heritage's critical role in achieving sustainable development goals.

Education is widely acknowledged as one of the key drivers of heritage conservation and transmission [1]. Heritage education, grounded in the notion of bonds and relationships between cultural assets and people [3], cultivates an awareness of heritage as a component of our collective memory and identity. This connection not only ensures the sustainability of our predecessors' legacy [1] but also encourages we descendants to reflect on our origins and future directions [4]. As Patrick [5] (1989) notes, without a solid sense of their past, a sense of identity rooted in time and space, people are poorly equipped to face the future.

In numerous countries, heritage education has been deployed as a national strategy to educate young people about their cultural heritage, its historical development and transformation. This approach brings the past into the present to fostering cultural identity [6]. The most important

document from Council of Europe concerning culture is the Convention on the Value of cultural Heritage for Society (Faro Convention) [7]. Article 13 of it advocates for countries to take measures to “facilitate the inclusion of the cultural heritage dimension at all levels of education” [8]. In Spain, both national and regional (Andalusia) curricula legal texts in early childhood and primary education, emphasize the importance of heritage knowledge in developing identity and a sense of belonging [9].

In the Chinese educational system, developing cultural identity in the next generation and including fine traditional Chinese culture into education at all levels have been incorporated into national policies [10]. The policy emphasizes balancing inheritance with innovation, focusing on creative transformation and innovative development, and fully utilizing the cultural heritage’s potential to promote sustainability. The guidelines for traditional culture education in China [11] aim to help youngsters better understand and identify with their own cultural heritage, enhance historical consciousness and build cultural confidence. The guidelines for incorporating fine traditional Chinese culture into primary and secondary school curriculum [12] propose cultivating cultural identity in early education stage and cultural self-awareness in higher education stage [13].

Chinese cultural heritage education promotes a non-exclusive identity education, different from Samuel P. Huntington’s “Clash of Civilizations” theory, by focusing on cultural identity-based education to teach for peaceful coexistence. As Fei Xiaotong [14] (2015) states, “appreciating one’s own best” does not preclude “appreciating the best of others”. Education should strive for the ideal vision where “each appreciates its own best, appreciates the best in others, and all appreciate the best together for the greater harmony of all.”

Scholars acknowledge the significant value of implementing cultural heritage education in early childhood. This approach encourages teachers to use non-abstract historical elements that allow children to form experiential connections [15], fostering a meaningful closeness and understanding of their surroundings [16]. It helps children recognize their part in a collective history, develop a sense of community and belonging [17-18], and supports the innovative development and creative transformation of cultural heritage [19].

Implementing heritage education programs must align with children’s developmental status and learning characteristics. However, there is a noticeable lack of clarity in the goals of heritage education, with goals and sequences for each age group are not well-defined [20-21]. Furthermore, relevant policies and academic literature insufficiently discuss the aims of cultural identity enlightenment. In practice, cultural identity educational goals are often implicit, and heritage is frequently treated as a supplemental or auxiliary resource for social sciences teaching, with many teachers failing to associate it with educational goals [15]. The focus of heritage teaching and learning is heavily on knowledge acquisition [1,22], with terms like “knowledge” and “recognize” frequently used, while the goals of fostering more critical awareness and attitudes are rarely explicitly stated [21,23-25].

Currently, teachers in China who conduct cultural heritage education face challenges such as a disconnection between activities and educational goals, overly vague goal setting, and a lack of age-appropriateness content [26]. It is imperative to explore how to integrate the cultural identity orientation of heritage education into preschool education, additionally, further research is needed to evaluate how young children’s identification with their cultural heritage is developed.

### *1.2. Research Question and Aims*

The investigation into the early learning framework of cultural identity for children aged 5 to 6 began during the researcher’s master’s studies in 2018 [27], which aims to provide guidance for teachers to identify and evaluate the emerging cultural identity of young children and offer further educational support. From 2021 to the present, the doctoral research project — supported by a research team of university professor and experts from early education institutions focusing on cultural heritage education — seeks to develop a cultural heritage education model for kindergartens. This model emphasizes the enlightenment of cultural identity and promotes young children’s understanding and exploration of cultural heritage and its underlying meaning.

As part of this doctoral research project, this study specifically aims to develop a structured set of educational goals targeting "cultural identity" in children aged 3 to 6. This will allow for a clear visualization of the growth trajectory of cultural identity in early stages and assist teachers in clarifying goals to guide their teaching and assessment.

Within this main goal, two specific objectives are proposed:

SO1: To clarify the construction of cultural identity enlightenment and, based on this, design a draft goal system for heritage education in early years, guided by the value orientation of cultural heritage education in China.

SO2: To Assess and refine the draft goals by applying them in cultural heritage education programs implemented in kindergarten.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Participants

In the context of China's vigorous promotion of including fine traditional Chinese culture into education, two public kindergartens in Nanjing have recognized the value of local cultural heritage resources and have attempted to incorporate these resources into their educational processes. During the 2023-2024 academic year, they implemented thematic and project-based activities, including traditional festivals activity such as "Joyful New Year Celebrations", folklore activities like "Autumn in Nanjing—Chrysanthemum Appreciation at Xuanwu Lake" and "Local Delicacies I Know", art activities such as "Good and Round" and "Chinses Traditional Colors—Red", and language activities like "Making Friends with Books," which involves the origin and evolution of Chinese characters and books, exploration projects of historical sites such as " Jiangning Imperial Silk Manufacturing Museum—The Grand Stage, Mysterious Houses" and "The Bridge Family", additionally, museum-related activities such as "Impressions of the Oriental Metropolitan Museum."

From October 2023 to June 2024, the researcher collected and analyzed the performances of children in junior class (3-4-years old), middle class (4-5 years old), and senior class (5-6 years old) in these two kindergartens through full-day participatory observation and bi-weekly teaching and research activities. This was done to examine and confirm the existence, interrelationships, and developmental progression of the dimensions and elements of the cultural identity enlightenment goals.

### 2.2. Design of the Research

The development of the goal framework for cultural identity enlightenment was grounded in the theory of curriculum theorist Ralph Tyler [28] and proceeded through two phases. Initially, the drafting phase primarily employed literature research, while the validation phase relied on field observations and focused group discussions with the research team.

In the drafting phase, several key steps were undertaken to establish the goal framework: (1) Analyzing relevant psychological studies to clarify the psychological construct of cultural identity. (2) Examining policies and significant academic works related to Chinese traditional cultural education to identify high-priority value orientations. These orientations functioned as educational philosophical filters to select crucial elements of cultural identity enlightenment that align with the current educational context in China. (3) Consulting empirical studies on cultural identity development in early childhood, along with relevant early years learning and development standards and evaluation tools from several countries, to draft stage goals for cultural identity enlightenment, thereby forming a preliminary goal system.

Table 1 summarizes the core literature that underpins the construction of goal system, while Table 2 illustrates the basis for drafting stage goals using the "cultural identity awareness" element as an example.

**Table 1.** Summary of Core Literature Basis for Goal System Construction.

| Relevant Psychological Theories and Empirical Studies |   | Relevant Policies and Academic Works   | Relevant Early Learning Standards or Evaluation Tools   |           |
|---|---|--|---|-----------|
| Field   | Researchers and Conclusions   | <p><b>Policy Documents:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>•2014 "Guidelines for the Education of fine traditional Chinese culture " [11]</li><li>•2017 "Opinions on Implementing the Inheritance and Development Project of fine traditional Chinese culture " [10]</li><li>•2019 "Outline for the Implementation of Patriotic Education in the New Era" [38]</li><li>•2021 "Guidelines for the Integration of fine traditional Chinese culture into Primary and Secondary School Curriculum" [12]</li></ul> <p><b>Academic Works:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>•Xu Jialu, "The Future and Mission of Chinese Culture" [39]</li><li>•Fei Xiaotong, "Culture and Cultural Self-Awareness" [40]</li><li>•Zheng Xiaoyun, "Theory of Cultural Identity" [41]</li><li>•Chen Shilian, "Culture and Children's Socialization" [42]</li></ul> | Early Learning Standards or Evaluation Tools  | Country   |
| Developmental Psychology Theories                     | Erikson's Self-Identity Theory [29] and Marcia's Identity Development Model [30]<br><b>Mechanism:</b> Exploration, Commitment   |  | "3-6 Years Old Children's Learning and Development Guidelines" - "Social Domain" Sense of Belonging Goal [43] | China     |
| Social Psychology Theories                            | Tajfel and Turner's Social Identity Theory [31], Self-Categorization Theory [32]<br><b>Mechanism:</b> Comparison, Categorization, Salience  |  | Taiwan "Preschool Curriculum Guidelines" - Constructing Cultural Identity Goal [44]                           |           |
| Empirical Studies                                     | Phinney's Ethnic Identity Model [33]<br><b>Construct:</b> Self-Classification and Labeling, Commitment, Attachment, Exploration, Ethnic Behavior Expression, Evaluation and Ingroup Attitude, Values, Importance and Salience |  | EYFS "Understanding the World" Domain "People and Communities" [45]   | UK        |
|   | Umaña-Taylor's Ethnic-Racial Identity Development Model [34]<br><b>Construct:</b> Ethnic-Racial Awareness, Group Belonging, Attitudes, Behaviors, Knowledge   |  | VEYLDF "Children Forming Strong Identity" Learning Outcomes [46]  | Australia |
|   | Wang Huamin et al.'s Study on College Students' Cultural Identity [35]<br><b>Construct:</b> Cognitive Identity, Emotional Identity, Spirit Identity, Behavioral Identity  |  | COR "Social Studies" Domain [47]  | USA       |
|   | Lü Lijie et al.'s Scale of Cultural Identity among Middle and High School Students [36]<br><b>Construct:</b> Cultural Symbol Identity, Cultural Identity, Value Cultural Identity   |  | GOLD "Social Studies" Domain [48]   |           |
|   | Pan Yuejuan et al.'s Scale of Preschool Children's Cultural Identity [37]<br><b>Construct:</b> Chinese Cultural Identity, Subcultural Attitudes and Preferences, Subcultural Identity Efforts                                 |  | WSS "Social Studies" Domain [49]  |           |
|   |   |  | DRDP "History-Social Science" Domain [50]   |           |



Table 2. Example of Stage 1 of "Cultural Identity Awareness" Element.

|                             |           |   |
|-----------------------------|-----------|---|
| Cultural Identity Awareness | Stage One | <b>Reference:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Guidelines (China): At ages 3-4, children begin to perceive themselves as members of a family.</li><li>•Taiwan: At age 4, children understand similarities and differences in lifestyles between themselves and others.</li><li>•COR: Young children show interest in how they and their families are similar to or different from others, considering attributes such as gender, age, family structure, and culture as natural differences.</li><li>•EYFS: Children recognize differences between themselves and others, between families, communities, and traditions. At 30-50 months, they understand what makes them unique and can discuss similarities and differences related to friends or family.</li></ul> |
|                             |           | <b>Draft:</b> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1.Identify similarities and differences between themselves, others, and families (e.g., food preferences, routines, rules, habits).</li><li>2.Realize that we are members of a family and a class.</li></ol>  |

Second, the draft goal system required revised based on field studies to ensure alignment with the developmental status of young children in China. The researcher tracked thematic and project-based activities related to cultural heritage education in two kindergartens, using audio and video recording tools to document children's performance and the contexts of the activities. The organization and analysis of the collected data on children's performances proceeded as follows:

The leftmost column records the time, followed by the cultural identity elements extracted from children's specific performances (see Table 3). In analyzing the developmental progression of specific cultural identity elements, the data were reorganized to assess changes in these elements over time (see Table 4). This systematic organization and analysis of the data facilitated the examination of the existence and developmental progression of cultural identity enlightenment within the draft goal system.

Table 3. Coding Example for Daily Observation Data.

| Middle Class Thematic activity: Autumn in Nanjing—Chrysanthemum Appreciation at Xuanwu Lake (From 2023.10.30 to 11.17) |   |                             |                           |   |
|--|---|-----------------------------|---------------------------|---|
| Time   | Group Membership Awareness  | Knowledge and Understanding | Closeness and Affirmation | Exploration and Commitment  |
| 10.31  | Mumu: My hometown is in Bengbu, Anhui. My grandparents live there, they raise chickens and ducks.<br>T: What delicious food and fun activities are there in your hometown?<br>Mumu: There's coconut water, it's |                             |                           | (Facing the map of China)<br>Mumu: I want to look up my hometown, Bengbu, Anhui. My grandparents live there.<br>T: How do you get there?<br>Mumu: By train.<br>T: How long does it take?<br>(Mumu didn't speak) |

|      |  |  |  |   |
|------|--|--|--|---|
|      | really tasty! (Later asked and found out it was brought back by her uncle who lives in Hainan – an island province)<br>Xiao Zhe: The winter in Harbin is very cold, everyone has to wear padded jackets. |  |  |   |
| 11.1 |  | (After chrysanthemum pot outdoor sketching activity)<br>T: Why do so many people go to Xuanwu Lake to see chrysanthemums?<br>Child1: Because Xuanwu Lake is fun.<br>Pingping: Because there are many different flowers.<br>Yinuo: Because there are many different kinds of (flowers).<br>Xiao Xu, Da Zhi: Because they are coughing.<br>T: What can chrysanthemums be used for?<br>Childs: To treat coughs; fevers; sore throats.     | (After chrysanthemum pot outdoor sketching activity)<br>T: How do you feel when you see chrysanthemums?<br>Childs: Like a smiling face; it makes my heart bloom too; like a little sun; I really like it.  | Xiao Chen saw the teacher looking up Lianyungang City on the multimedia machine's map of China and asked: Why can't I find Xianlin Yuecheng?<br>T: Where is Xianlin Yuecheng?<br>Xiao Chen: I don't know either, it's my grandma's house.<br>T: Can you find it on the Nanjing map?<br>Xiao Chen: I don't know, try zooming out and looking.<br>Xinxin saw the teacher looking up Lianyungang on the multimedia machine's map of China, said to Da Zhi next to him: Lianyungang is one station before Rizhao, Shandong Rizhao, and Qingdao.<br>Da Zhi: Is Shandong your hometown?<br>Xinxin: No, I went there once on a trip. |
| 11.2 |  | (Watching old photos of Xuanwu Lake Chrysanthemum Appreciation Festival from 1957 to present; listening to the teacher's childhood experiences at the festival)<br>T: Why do we hold the Chrysanthemum Festival in autumn?<br>Xiao Xu: To treat colds.<br>Hao Jun: We won't catch colds by this way.<br>Xiao Yan: Because chrysanthemums make the air very good.<br>Xiao Xu: They can defeat viruses.<br>Da Zhi: They can treat colds. | T: Do you want to drink chrysanthemum tea?<br>C: Yes!<br>(teacher poured a small cup for everyone)<br>Hao Jun: Chrysanthemum tea is so delicious.<br>Child1: So bitter!<br>Child2: Extremely bitter!<br>T: There's also a fragrance, do you smell it?<br>Child3: Another cup, please.<br>Child4: I'm feeling a bit warm. |   |

|      |  |   |  |   |
|------|--|---|--|---|
|      |  | <p>T: You all mentioned the uses of chrysanthemums, but my question is why do we hold the Chrysanthemum Festival every year?</p> <p>Childs: Because it's beautiful; fragrant.</p>   | <p>Hao Jun: Too delicious.</p> <p>Yi Chen: I feel very bitter</p> <p>Xiao Yan: But it smells nice.</p>   |   |
| 11.3 |  |   |  | <p>Hao Jun: Do you know where Bagua Island is?</p> <p>T: Is Bagua Island in Nanjing?</p> <p>Hao Jun: I don't know.</p> <p>T: How do you get there?</p> <p>Hao Jun: Do you know where Qinhuangdao is? You have to take a train. (After further asking, found out he had been there on a trip)</p> <p>Xiao Jie pointed to the Sun Yat-sen Mausoleum icon on the Nanjing map and said: This is the Sun Yat-sen Mausoleum. Then, Xiao Fan looked at the other side of the map of China and said: So what is this here? It's the Hongshan Zoo (there are many animal and plant icons on the map of China; Hongshan Zoo is a zoo located in Nanjing).</p> |
| 11.6 |  | <p>(After children recorded today's highest and lowest temperatures in a chart)</p> <p>T: I noticed a change (showing photos of children wearing short sleeves in October). Today's clothing...?</p> <p>Childs: I wore three layers; I wore five layers...</p> <p>T: Why are you wearing thicker?</p> <p>Childs: Because it's cold; I will get sick; catching a cold. Then teacher connected yesterday's and today's lowest and highest temperatures</p> <p>Childs: It dropped.</p> | <p>T: What changes have occurred with the chrysanthemums in our kindergarten?</p> <p>Xiao Jie: Covered with a blanket.</p> <p>T: Who went to see them?</p> <p>Xiao Yan, Yinuo: They withered and dried up.</p> <p>Xiao Xu: They're still blooming, I went to see them!</p> | <p>(Introducing the globe, all the children knew it was called a globe)</p> <p>T: What's on the globe?</p> <p>Yu Hua: Grass (pointing to the green area of Brazil).</p> <p>Zi Qi: Brazil.</p> <p>T: There are also words on it, Brazil, the USA, China, Japan, what do these refer to?</p> <p>Childs: Locations; places to live; names.</p> <p>T: United States, China... all countries can be found on the globe.</p>  |



**Table 4.** Coding Example for Analyzing Changes in “Knowledge and Understanding” Elements.

| <b>Middle Class Thematic activity:</b> Autumn in Nanjing – Chrysanthemum Appreciation at Xuanwu Lake (From 2023.10.30 to 11.17) |  |   |
|---|--|---|
| <b>Time</b>   | <b>Knowledge and Understanding</b>   | <b>Development Status Analysis</b>  |
| 10.30   | Mumu was reading the picture book "The Little Goose's Autumn" and said: "In my hometown, there are wild geese and little swallows. In autumn, they fly south."   | "Autumn" related experiences: Swallows flying south.  |
| 11.1  | (After chrysanthemum pot outdoor sketching activity)<br>T: Why do so many people go to Xuanwu Lake to see chrysanthemums?<br>Child1: Because Xuanwu Lake is fun.<br>Pingping: Because there are many different flowers.<br>Yinuo: Because there are many different kinds of (flowers).<br>Xiao Xu, Da Zhi: Because they cough<br>T: What can chrysanthemums be used for?<br>Childs: To treat coughs, fevers, sore throats.   | Children's focus on Xuanwu Lake Chrysanthemum Festival: now, centered around the chrysanthemums themselves. 1. Appearance characteristics (fragrance, beauty, different shapes) 2. Functions for treating diseases and promoting health.  |
| 11.2  | T: Why do we hold the Chrysanthemum Festival in autumn?<br>Xiao Xu: To treat colds.<br>Hao Jun: We won't catch colds by this way.<br>Xiao Yan: Because chrysanthemums make the air very good.<br>Xiao Xu: They can defeat viruses.<br>Da Zhi: They can treat colds.<br>T: You all mentioned the uses of chrysanthemums, but my question is why do we hold the Chrysanthemum Festival every year?<br>Childs: Because it's beautiful; fragrant.  |   |
| 11.6  | T: This is the photo we took last Friday when we watered the chrysanthemums. Some parts of the colorful chrysanthemum in this pot are fully bloomed, some haven't fully opened, and some are still buds. This is today's photo. Look at this pot of chrysanthemums, what changes do you see?<br>Mumu: They have bloomed.<br>T: Why are we wearing such thick clothes, but the chrysanthemums are blooming?<br>Childs: Because chrysanthemums like the cold; they bloom when it's cold; they are not afraid of the cold...<br>T: Winter is coming soon, let's see what changes will happen to the chrysanthemums.<br>(After going to the kindergarten square to see chrysanthemum pots)<br>T: Do you have any questions about chrysanthemums?<br>Childs: Why do chrysanthemums fall off; why do chrysanthemums wither?<br>Xiaoxu: Why can chrysanthemums be made into chrysanthemum tea?<br>Xiaojie, Xiaoxu: Why can chrysanthemums cure colds and coughs?<br>Yinuo: Why do little bugs bite chrysanthemums, why do chrysanthemums have many colors?<br>Lifan: Why is this chrysanthemums white on the outside and green on the inside? | "Autumn" related experiences: Temperature dropping, cold, wearing more clothes.<br>Centered around the chrysanthemums themselves. 1. Growth changes and their relationship with temperature. 2. Characteristics: A chrysanthemum has different colors; many varieties; making tea; treating illnesses; liking the cold, not afraid of the cold. |

|  |  |  |
|--|--|--|
|  | Xiaoxiao: Why do chrysanthemums grow differently?<br>Pingping: Why are some small and some big?<br>T: Why did the lotus flowers in our little pond wither?<br>Childs: Because they are afraid of the cold.<br>T: Why did the chrysanthemums bloom?<br>Xiaoxu: Because chrysanthemums like the cold, and lotus flowers like the heat. |  |
|--|--|--|

Finally, the goal system texts were provided to the research team, and two focused group discussions were conducted with 11 participants. These discussions centered on the developed goal framework of cultural identity enlightenment, examining individual goals as well as the correlations and progression among them. Following these discussions, a timely organization and analysis of the feedback were conducted, resulting in two rounds of modifications to the goal framework.

3. Results

3.1. Draft Goal System for Cultural Identity Enlightenment

Based on comprehensive literature research, a draft goal system for the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions of cultural identity enlightenment was constructed (see Table 5). Additionally, the developmental trajectory for each goal was preliminarily outlined as progressing through three stages (see Table 6).

Table 5. Draft goals for Cultural Identity Enlightenment.

| Dimension  | Element                     | Goal  |
|------------|-----------------------------|---|
| Cognitive  | Cultural Identity Awareness | 1-1: Understand the similarities and differences between ourselves and others.<br>1-2: Realize that individuals are members of a group.<br>1-3: Use cultural membership characteristics to describe group identity.<br>1-4: Label myself with Chinese cultural identity.  |
|            | Knowledge and Understanding | 2-1: know specific cultural heritage things.<br>2-2: Understand their evolution and the importance of their spiritual content for the survival and well-being of the local community, establishing personal connections in the process.   |
| Emotional  | Closeness and Affirmation   | 3-1: Feel safe and comfortable within the group, with mutual dependence among its members.<br>3-2: Express positive evaluations such as affirmation and pride in culture heritage and one’s membership.   |
| Behavioral | Exploration and Commitment  | 4-1: Explore the relationship between regional location, natural conditions, and local lifestyles, initially considering the meaning behind specific ways of living.<br>4-2: Nurture curiosity about past events and think how the past influences present life.<br>4-3: Show active engagement through following, imitating, participating in, investigating, and creating cultural heritage content or practices, driven by a desire to explore more about the cultural background. |

Table 6. Draft Stage Goals for Cultural Identity Enlightenment.

| Goal   | Stage one  | Stage two   | Stage three  |
|--|--|---|--|
| <b>1-1: Understand the similarities and differences between ourselves and others.</b>  | Identify similarities and differences between oneself, others, and families (e.g., food preferences, routines, rules, habits). | Compare the similarities and differences in cultural characteristics of different places, such as language, songs, food, festivals, and architecture.       | Understand that in-group members are similar, different groups have distinct lifestyles, beliefs, and pursuits.                                      |
| <b>1-2: Realize that individuals are members of a group.</b>   | Realize that we are members of a family and a class.   | Become aware of my membership in the city or town.  | Know that I am Chinese   |
| <b>1-3: Use cultural membership characteristics to describe group identity.</b>  | Not yet emerged  | Demonstrate knowledge about the living habits or inventions of the local community.   | Use cultural membership characteristics to explain what makes a person Chinese.  |
| <b>1-4: Label myself with Chinese cultural identity.</b>   | Not yet emerged  | Use group identity to refer to oneself, even if the meaning is not yet clear.   | Discover the connection between Chinese culture and my own characteristics.  |
| <b>2-1: Know specific cultural heritage things.</b>  | Notice the traditional customs and inherited artifacts within the family.  | Recognize local tangible or intangible cultural heritage.   | Understand representative tangible or intangible cultural heritage within China.   |
| <b>2-2: Understand their evolution and the importance of their spiritual content for the survival and well-being of the local community, establishing personal connections in the process.</b> | Show interest in family old photos and stories.  | Begin to understand the past of a specific heritage in surroundings, with a basic understanding of the background of the local community.                   | Discover the wisdom, character, pursuits, or aesthetic ideals within specific heritage, and reflect on its significance and relationship to my life. |
| <b>3-1: Feel safe and comfortable within the group, with mutual dependence among its members.</b>  | Feel the warmth and care of those around, and feel comfortable within the group  | Become aware of my own value as part of the community, feel the mutual dependence among members and develop stable positive emotions towards the community. |  |
| <b>3-2: Express positive evaluations such as affirmation and pride</b>   | Not yet emerged  | Have a positive impression of Chinese   | Express pride in being a member of Chinese culture and its traditions.   |

| <b>in cultural heritage and one's membership.</b>  |  | cultural heritage elements or beliefs.   |  |
|--|--|--|--|
| <b>4-1: Explore the relationship between regional location, natural conditions, and local lifestyles, initially considering the meaning behind specific ways of living.</b>  | Identify and describe the location, space features, and special activities of familiar places.   | Have a preliminary understanding of the residence, exploring the natural conditions and the characteristics of local people's lives, while starting to notice how the environmental features differ from other places. | Have a preliminary understanding of larger environments such as provinces or countries, compare different places' natural conditions and community lifestyles, while considering the relationship between specific lifestyles and living environments. |
| <b>4-2: Nurture curiosity about past events and think how the past influences present life.</b>  | Discuss important events in my own experiences, family, or friends, and develop an understanding of the concept of time change.  | Share knowledge about events that occurred in the past, with a basic understanding of the concept of present, past, and future.  | Connect the past with the present, and reflect on how the past influences present life.  |
| <b>4-3: Show active engagement through following, imitating, participating in, investigating, and creating cultural heritage content or practices, driven by a desire to explore more about the cultural background.</b> | Be curious about or imitate culturally rich behaviors or activities performed by those around, such as tea brewing and drinking, and show interest in customs and festive events | Share and discuss various aspects of local heritage, such as scenic spots, historical buildings, and food preferences; eagerly participate in cultural practice activities.  | Explore specific cultural heritage and its background with adult support, eager to learn more about the context and able to respond to cultural expectations and norms (e.g., thriftiness).  |

### *3.2. Validation and Revision of the Draft Goal System in Kindergarten Heritage Education Practice*

An analysis of field observations and audio-video data from children's activities over one academic year was conducted to validate the dimensions and elements of the draft goal system. This analysis also identified areas needing revision due to inconsistencies with children's actual experiences.

#### *3.2.1. Verification and Revision of Goal Dimensions and Elements*

Firstly, certain areas were empirically validated and further refined. In the cognitive dimension, children's interactions with heritage were confirmed to be divisible into two distinct goals: "information acquisition about specific heritage itself" (Goal 2-1) and "understanding the meaning behind these things for the community's survival and well-being" (Goal 2-2). The latter goal typically builds upon the former and requires adult guidance to achieve. In the emotional dimension, it was

observed that children are indeed capable of forming positive attitudes, such as affirmation and pride, towards specific cultural heritage, which includes both the heritage itself and their underlying cultural meanings, such as ancient wisdom and aesthetic pursuits (Goal 3-2). Based on observational data, more detailed descriptions of the "affirmation" stage goal were provided (see subsequent text). In the behavioral dimension, beyond "exploration," substantial data on "expression and creation" actions were collected. Specifically, during activities, children engage in expression and creation — verbal communications, actions, drawings, crafts, constructive play, role-playing, etc. They even show divergent and creative expressions related to heritage and its deeper cultural meanings. Engagement in expression and creation is a vital aspect of children forming a close relationship with specific heritage, as they not only draw inspiration from them but also participate in their recreation, thus becoming a key element.

Secondly, inconsistencies and their underlying reasons were analyzed. The original goal of "Cultural Identity Awareness" posited that children could recognize their identity as members of Chinese culture based on their understanding of group membership (Goal 1-1 and 1-2), and, it was initially thought that the developmental trajectory of this goal would progress from an initial awareness of cultural membership to a deeper understanding of it. However, empirical observations indicate that this goal may set unrealistic expectations for young children. Specifically, younger children rarely demonstrate awareness at the "cultural membership" level and do not typically use cultural membership characteristics to define "me" or "us". In contrast, older children (ages 5-6), under teacher guidance, begin to develop self-identification as members of a nationality or local community. Consequently, the goal of "cultural identity awareness" was revised to the more appropriate "awareness of being a member of the local community, embodying common characteristics of locals", now termed "group member awareness".

In the emotional dimension, the initial assumption posited that children's sense of "Closeness" (Goal 3-1) would arise from feelings of safety, comfort, and interdependence experienced within the community, thereby fostering an affinity for the community's inherited assets. However, observations have revealed that the emotional drive for children to develop closeness and affection towards specific heritage can be directly triggered by their inherent charm and meaningful connotations, independent of group attachment as an intermediary.

In summary, revisions were made to certain elements within the goal system. The elements of "cultural identity awareness" and "closeness" in the draft goals were revised. Additionally, "exploration and commitment" was adjusted to encompass the elements of "exploration" and "expression and creation" within the behavioral dimension.

### 3.2.2. Verification and Revision of Division of Stage Goals

Firstly, certain areas were empirically validated and further refined. In the cognitive dimension, it was observed that children indeed gradually classify themselves as members of larger groups, progressing from "family and class" to "residential towns and cities", and ultimately to "hometown, ethnic group, and nation". This development in group classification and self-categorization (Goal 1-1 and 1-2) is closely related to children's geographical spatial skills. In the "knowledge and understanding" Goal 2-2, Stage 2, the original abstract and rough descriptions were further refined based on observational data. Additionally, in Stage 3 of this element, it was discovered that children, while becoming aware of the representativeness of heritage things and exploring their underlying meanings, are also capable of tracing the evolution of specific heritage from the past to the present with adult support. This process enables them to establish connections between heritage, their own identities, and their contemporary lives. Consequently, based on these findings, Stage 3 has been thoroughly refined.

In the emotional dimension, the goal of "affirmation" (Goal 3-2) was further delineated into more detailed stages informed by observational data. This progression begins with positive impressions of specific heritage itself, such as enjoyment and visual appeal, then advances to attitudes that reflect importance, care, pride, or appreciation towards certain heritage, and finally resonate with its deeper meanings.

In the behavioral dimension, the key elements were adjusted to include "exploration" and "expression and creation" with corresponding stage goals further supplemented based on empirical observations.

Secondly, inconsistencies and their underlying reasons were analyzed. The cognitive dimension's "cultural identity awareness" Goals (1-3 and 1-4) were found to be overly ambitious. It was observed that children's understanding of "place and region" remains at an initial stage, therefore, the expectation of guiding them to abstract the cultural characteristics of their local community and recognize the connections between these characteristics and themselves is unrealistic. Similarly, the Stages 2 and 3 in the behavioral dimension's "regional exploration" (Goal 4-1) is challenging for the aforementioned reasons. In the emotional dimension, Stage 2 of "affirmation" is low, furthermore, Stage 2 of "affirmation of beliefs" and Stage 3 of "pride in Chinese culture and its traditions " are overly vague and necessitate specific refinement based on observational data.

In summary, regarding the revision of the division of stage goals, the stages of "cultural identity awareness" were comprehensively revised. Stages 2 and 3 of "regional exploration" were modified, with Stage 2 focused on the scope of the residential city or town, while Stage 3 expanded to recognize regions beyond the place of residence, thereby fostering an initial understanding that China comprises a multitude of distinct places. Furthermore, Stages 2 and 3 of "knowledge and understanding", along with stage goals for "affirmation" and "expression and creation", were further detailed.

On the other hand, through focused group discussions with the research team, this goal system was further refined, resulting in enhanced clarity and precision in both logic and terminology. Firstly, regarding the logical structure, the original goal system included the understanding of regional and historical foundational concepts within the behavioral dimension's "exploration" element. The discussions concluded that this aspect is intrinsically linked to the "sense of space and history" and should be classified within the cognitive dimension. There was a consensus to categorize it as a general cognitive component that influences children's cultural understanding and identity construction. Additionally, several textual presentations were revised for greater accuracy. For instance, the phrase "demonstrating more exploratory actions towards specific heritage, its background, and values" was amended to "engaging in more actions (such as observing, touching, questioning, and investigating) to explore specific heritage and its deeper meanings."

### *3.3. The Early-Stage Framework of Cultural Identity Enlightenment in Heritage Education*

Through validation and revision, the final version of the goal system for cultural identity enlightenment in heritage education has been developed, as shown in Table 7.



Table 7. the Early-Stage Framework of Cultural Identity Enlightenment in Heritage Education.

| Dimension | Element  | Goal   | Stage one   | Stage two   | Stage three   |
|-----------|--|--|---|---|---|
| Cognitive | Group Membership Awareness (general cognitive component) | 1-1. Based on the similarities between “me” and “us”, and the differences with “them”, become aware of my membership in the group, and recognize the group shared characteristics reflected in myself. | Observe the environment and people characteristics of home, kindergarten, and class, perceiving oneself as a member of family and the class.  | Discover the common characteristics among local people, such as language, dietary preferences, festive customs, thereby beginning to perceive oneself as a member of a larger group, such as a city or town.  | Compare common objects or habits in in-group life with those in other groups, thereby clarifying and enriching the understanding of the shared characteristics of one’s own group (such as hometown, ethnicity, or country).  |
|           | Spatial-Temporal Awareness (general cognitive component) | 1-2. Gradually accumulate experiences over geographical breadth and historical depth, enhancing knowledge and understanding.   | <b>sense of place:</b><br>Recognize the locations and feature of familiar places, along with routines in settings such as home, kindergarten, and community.<br><b>sense of history:</b><br>Discuss events from personal experience, family, or friends, thereby developing an understanding of | <b>sense of place:</b><br>Notice the landscapes, climate, resources, and activities of the local community.<br><b>sense of history:</b><br>Become aware of the concepts of “past”, “present” and “future”, and develop an understanding of the connections between events through activities like reviewing and planning. | <b>sense of place:</b><br>Recognize a larger geographical range beyond residence, and understand that China comprises a multitude of distinct places.<br><b>sense of history:</b><br>Distinguish whether events or stories occurred in the “distant past” or “recent past” and become aware of the “distant past” and “far future” aided by specific imagery. Understand that the “present” is an extension of the “past” and the “present” influences future events. |

|                  |   |   |  |  |   |
|------------------|---|---|--|--|---|
|                  |   |   | time sequences and durations.  |  |   |
|                  | <b>Perception and Experience of Heritage</b>                        | 1-3. Gradually accumulate perceptions and experiences related to heritage.  | Interact with and experience the living heritage around us, discovering its features, functions, or customs.                               | Conduct in-depth observations of representative local heritage, discovering key features and comparing them with contemporary counterparts, with the aids of adults using resources like old photos, videos, or non-fiction stories, thereby recognize that certain heritage was created in the past and altered continuously by locals. | Compare specific local heritage with similar item from other regions or countries, discover similarities and differences in their forms, structures, functions or practices. Through this process, develop an understanding of uniqueness and an acceptance of diversity. Additionally, investigate and infer the evolution of certain heritage with support.                 |
|                  | <b>Understanding the Relationship between Heritage and the Self</b> | 1-4. Establish a connection between the experiences of specific heritage and my (our) survival or living needs, attempting to explain its meanings for me (us). | Experience positive feelings evoked by specific heritage, such as delicious, pleasant, visual and auditory enjoyable, convenient, and fun. | Experience and understand the significance of certain heritage objects or practices that were created in the past and have been passed down to the present (like, consider the consequences of lacking this heritage), recognizing their indispensability and value to oneself and the local community.                                  | Through exploring the background and reasons behind the creation and transformation of specific heritage, related to the survival or living needs at that time, realize that it has held significant meaning for generations living in the same place. Inspired by this heritage, I could become more capable and wise, and also contribute to its innovative transformation. |
| <b>Emotional</b> | <b>Closeness</b>  | 2-1. Develop a closeness to specific heritage and be willing to spend effort exploring it.  | Become attracted to certain heritage but may not actively engage with it when not in contact.  | Develop a fondness for specific heritage, actively interact with it, and feel enjoyable.   | Regularly spend time interacting with beloved heritage object or practice, feeling satisfied with these experiences and explorations.   |
|                  | <b>Affirmation</b>  | 2-2. Express affirmation, appreciation, or pride for specific heritage.   | Express positive evaluations of its external form, such  | Exhibit an attitude of appreciation or admiration towards specific heritage.   | Resonate with the deeper meanings of specific heritage, thereby demonstrating appreciation, admiration, or pride.   |

|            |                         |  |   |   |  |
|------------|-------------------------|--|---|---|--|
|            |                         |  | as beautiful and joyful.  |   |  |
| Behavioral | Exploration             | 3-1. Engage in more actions (such as observing, touching, questioning, investigating) to explore specific heritage and its deeper meanings.  | show curiosity or imitate certain traditions performed by those around, and explore related artifacts through sensory or actions.   | Actively ask questions, explore, compare, express opinions and participate in discussions based on observations and experiences related to specific heritage. | Pursue “why” questions about the origins, evolution, and significance of specific heritage to both “people now and in the past” and “people here and there”. With adult support, make plans for investigation and collaborate in teams to conduct long-term inquiries to seek answers. |
|            | Expression and Creation | 3-2. Based on the exploration of certain heritage, express perceptions of itself and understanding of its underly meanings, engage in association, imagination, transformation, or recreation about this heritage. | Use drawings or symbols to record, represent, or express the thoughts and feelings gained from specific heritage exploration, and to reproduce, simulate or recreate certain heritage using personal imagination. |   | Based on the resonance with the meanings of specific heritage, intend to transform and recreate it, or utilize modern resources to address common issues that persist from the past to the present.  |

#### 4. Discussion and Conclusion

This study aims to develop an educational goal system for cultural identity enlightenment in children aged 3 to 6. The framework is designed to enable teachers to systematically grasp the direction of cultural heritage education in early years, avoiding fragmented or off-target activities. Moreover, it serves as a formative assessment tool, aiding teachers in identifying children's related performances and guiding them progressively in constructing cultural identity during activities.

Through the two stages of drafting and validating, an early-stage framework for cultural identity enlightenment was ultimately established. Following a detailed illustration of the cultural identity enlightenment goals (see Table 7), this section analyzes the structure of these cultural heritage education goals and explains how these goals are progressively achieved during early childhood.

##### *4.1. Dimensions and Elements of Cultural Identity Enlightenment Goals*

"Cultural identity" is a comprehensive psychological construct that refers to an individual's understanding and affirmation of their cultural self. It encompasses emotional belonging and spiritual support within a cultural group, representing the expansion of personal identity to a higher, more abstract level of cultural membership. In kindergarten cultural heritage education, the key to fostering cultural identity enlightenment lies in helping young children establish a connection between heritage and their sense of self. This connection nurtures feelings of closeness and affirmation towards heritage, encourages active engagement with the heritage itself and its deeper meanings, and facilitates the expression and creation activities that integrate personal experiences and needs.

Specifically, the cognitive dimension encompasses "general cognitive" components — group member awareness (Goal 1-1) and spatial-temporal awareness (Goal 1-2) — that influence children's cultural understanding and identity construction. This aligns with the perspectives presented by Valencia Arnica YK et al. in their 2023 paper [51], which highlight that spatial skills and historical awareness are crucial for students to understand their heritage. Additionally, the cognitive dimension includes the perception and experience of heritage (Goal 1-3) and the understanding of the relationship between certain heritage and their sense of self (Goal 1-4), with the latter being particularly vital. The emotional dimension comprises the emotional drive of "closeness" (Goal 2-1) and the positive evaluation associated with "affirmation" (Goal 2-2). The behavioral dimension includes the exploration of specific heritage (Goal 3-2) and expression and creation related to it (Goal 3-2).

The dimensions and elements of cultural identity enlightenment identified in this study align with the procedural route of "heritagization" and its sequel "identization" as proposed by Fontal and further developed by Gómez-Redondo [25]. However, unlike the sequential relationship of knowing-understanding-respecting-valuing-heritagizing-identizing on an individual level-sharing-reaching consensus-identizing on a collective level, the "cognitive", "emotional" and "behavioral" dimensions and elements that collectively constitute cultural identity enlightenment are interdependent and interwoven.

For instance, when children discover that a local cultural heritage is an important historical invention, it significantly enhances their sense of pride; the more they value cultural heritage and their identity as members of that culture, the greater their desire to learn, which in turn fosters continuous exploratory actions. This interconnectedness highlights how cognitive understanding, appreciation attitude, and behavioral engagement reinforce one another in the development of cultural identity.

##### *4.2. Progressive Stages of Cultural Identity Enlightenment*

Cultural identity requires the development of multiple psychological elements as a prerequisite, gradually interweaving to form an initial construct, it is not something innate or formed spontaneously through simple quantitative changes; rather, it requires the accumulation of numerous

related experiences and conscious guidance at key nodes to establish connections between each element. Understanding the progressive sequence of cultural identity enlightenment in early childhood is crucial to avoid both unrealistic expectations and uncritical elevation in education practices.

It is particularly important to emphasize that "stages" are not strictly linked to age groups, instead, they reflect the accumulation of relevant experiences by children. However, since young children's experiences are usually closely related to their age, these "stages" can be roughly associated with age groups, while avoiding rigid correspondence.

The cultural identity enlightenment status at each stage is described as follows:

Stage One, children primarily accumulate direct experiences regarding "what this heritage is like and how it feels". They interact with specific heritage objects and practices in their daily lives, fostering positive feelings through these interactions and developing a initial interest in them.

Stage Two, children engage in in-depth observations of locally representative heritage, comparing its past forms with contemporary counterparts. They gather opinions and attitudes from people around them, leading to an awareness that certain heritage is a creation from the past that has been transmitted to the present. This understanding highlights its importance for those living in the same community, fostering attitudes of care and appreciation.

Stage Three, children explore the "uniqueness" of certain heritage through comparison, and come to understand the significance it has held for our survival or well-being from the past to the present within a historical continuity. This exploration helps establish connections between the value of certain heritage and their own sense of identity and life experiences. At this stage, children attain an emergent cultural identity, becoming aware that certain heritage is an invention of their predecessors from a distant past, created to fulfill specific needs and later adapted for particular purposes. They understand that certain aspects of this heritage retain ongoing significance for us — whether through beauty, functionality, or the wisdom and character they embody. Children are not only inspired by specific heritage but also actively engage in its recreation.

A person's positive connection with their culture begins early in life [34,52]. The understanding of the significance of heritage and feelings of closeness that emerge in early years establish a crucial foundation for adolescents to engage in a deeper exploration of the core value system of cultural heritage. This process enables them to integrate these values into themselves, ultimately forming a mature and stable cultural identity. Consequently, they are empowered to engage confidently in meaningful communication with diverse cultures, while also promoting the sustainable and innovative development of their heritage.

## 5. Educational Implications

In practice, the clarity of goals directly influences where teachers allocate their time and effort, as well as the content they guide children to explore. "Unclear objectives" is identified as a primary reason for the inefficacy in current heritage education practices. Therefore, what specific short-term goals serve as prerequisites for the long-term aim of cultural identity enlightenment, particularly in the context of sustainable development? How can these goals be achieved in a step-by-step manner to effectively contribute to the overarching goal?

The detailed delineation of dimensions and stages in the educational goals of "cultural identity enlightenment" in this study is primarily intended to assist teachers in comprehending the developmental trajectory of children's cultural identity. It facilitates teachers' understanding of the processes through which children internalize the traditional culture of their community, enabling them to set appropriate goals for their educational actions. On the other hand, this goal framework allows teachers to continuously evaluate the developmental status of children's emergent cultural identity, thereby informing their pedagogical decisions. Specifically, by using this framework as a reference, teachers can sensitively identify children's cognitive operations, emotions, attitudes, and behavioral tendencies during activities. By comparing these observations to the goal system, teachers can effectively pinpoint "areas needing development" thereby determining clues for subsequent educational actions. Furthermore, by supporting children's ongoing exploration, expression, and

creation, teachers can promote the continuous deepening and broadening of children's cognitive and emotional development, fostering a deeper understanding of the sustainable and innovative development of heritage.

In conclusion, this goal framework serves as a valuable tool for teachers to effectively identify and support the development of children's cultural identity within kindergarten heritage education activities. By establishing appropriate expectations and creating exploratory environments based on the dynamic development of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions, along with their key elements and progressive stages, teachers can provide effective support for the gradual enlightenment of cultural identity in early childhood. This approach not only nurtures cultural identity but also integrates heritage education as a vital component of sustainable development, aligning with broader sustainable development goals.

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