

# Collaborative Action Research on the Implementation of a Preschool Aesthetic Thematic Curriculum

Yu-Ting Chen<sup>1)</sup>

Nanhua University

## Abstract

Using collaborative action research, this study aimed to investigate the practice of implementing an aesthetic thematic curriculum in a preschool in Taiwan. The author served as a curriculum consultant and co-teacher with two early childhood teachers in a mixed-age preschool class. The participants were 22 young children aged 3 to 5. Data sources included classroom observations, interviews, teaching reflection notes, aesthetic ability assessment, and other documentation. The major findings are as follows. (1) Based on young children's life experiences, the co-teachers applied a thematic approach to integrating the aesthetic domain and other learning domains in the aesthetic thematic curriculum, focusing on the topic of "Beautiful Restaurants." (2) The young children's aesthetic abilities were developed in terms of exploring and perceiving, performing and creating, and responding and appreciating. Moreover, there was a significant difference in the children's aesthetic abilities. (3) The co-teachers promoted their professional development in aesthetic curriculum design and aesthetic teaching skills. Recommendations for early childhood aesthetic education and teacher education are discussed.

**Keywords:** aesthetic thematic curriculum, young children's aesthetic ability, aesthetic teaching

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Corresponding author, <sup>1)</sup> [chenyuti@gmail.com](mailto:chenyuti@gmail.com)

## Introduction

Aesthetic education is fundamental to young children's holistic development and future lives. The development of aesthetic has been promoted in early childhood education in both western and Asia countries (e.g. Curriculum Development Council, 2006; Korea Institute of Child Care and Education, 2013; Ministry of Education and Research, 2006). The Ministry of Education (MOE) in Taiwan also acknowledges the importance of aesthetic education in early schooling. For instance, the *Early Childhood Education and Care Curriculum Framework* incorporates the aesthetic domain into the early childhood curriculum (MOE, 2016). The aesthetic domain aims to help young children perceive the environment, enrich their imagination and creation of the arts, and develop their aesthetic feelings and preferences (MOE, 2016). The *Intermediate and Long Term Plans for Aesthetic Education* argues for aesthetic education from early schooling to life-long learning (MOE, 2013). It emphasizes developing young children's aesthetic perception and enriching their aesthetic experiences through the arts. As a result, the development of early childhood aesthetic programs is promoted in preschools in Taiwan.

With the promotion of aesthetic education in early schooling in Taiwan, studies on aesthetic education for young children have also increased. Some researchers found that early childhood educators agreed with the importance of aesthetic education for young children, but had insufficient professional knowledge in the area (Chen, 2014; Yang, 2014). Some early childhood educators have conducted action research to improve aesthetic teaching in their profession (e.g. Cheng, 2016; Kuo, 2015). However, few studies have involved collaborative research between early childhood educators and university professors.

As a preschool consultant and teacher educator in early childhood education, I have found that some early childhood teachers show their interest in early childhood aesthetic programs but have difficulty of getting starting. In order to help early childhood teachers to improve the quality of early childhood aesthetic education and to benefit young children's aesthetic learning, I conducted a collaborative action research study in collaboration with early childhood teachers to implement the aesthetic thematic curriculum in their classroom. This study provides us with a lens to examine the implementation of an aesthetic thematic

curriculum for young children. It also provides a reference for early childhood aesthetic education.

## **Literature Review**

### **Aesthetic Education for Young Children**

Aesthetic education is usually defined as a process of learning through intellectual processes and encountering various modes of the arts (Lim, 2000). Aesthetic education in Chinese, however, has a broader meaning. It is defined as a way to educate learners to express their aesthetic feelings, cultivate their temperament, and achieve happiness and a high quality of life (Hsuang, 1986). It also aims to help learners to perceive, explore, feel, and recognize aesthetic subjects, put aesthetics into practice, and thus develop themselves holistically (MOE, 2013).

Aesthetic education is important for young children (Feeney, 1987; Jalongo & Stamp, 1997; Lim, 2004), who are uniquely sensitive and imaginative. They participate in various modes of art activities in daily life, such as visual arts, music, movement, story, or drama. Consequently, they can develop their aesthetic perceptions and enrich their learning experiences through participating in various art activities and the aesthetic world (Lim, 2000).

The aesthetic domain is integrated into early childhood curricula in Taiwan. The purpose of the aesthetic domain is to help young children perceive the environment, enrich their imagination and creation of works of art, and develop their aesthetic feelings and preferences. In other words, it emphasizes developing young children's aesthetic abilities and feelings through aesthetic activities. Aesthetic abilities refer to the ability to explore and perceive, perform and create, and respond to and appreciate the arts. The aesthetic subjects consist of everything in the living environment and various media in the visual arts, music, drama, or creative dance. In summary, the aesthetic domain helps young children to develop their aesthetic abilities and enjoy the learning process of aesthetic activities (MOE, 2016).

In order to improve the quality of aesthetic education for young children, I led the early

childhood teachers to integrate the aesthetic domain into the thematic curriculum in a preschool classroom. It provided learning opportunities for the young children to develop their aesthetic abilities in the dimensions of perceiving and exploring, performing and creating, and responding to and appreciating the arts.

### **Research in Early Childhood Aesthetic Education Programs**

Previous studies have explored certain aesthetic education programs in early schooling. Some researchers have employed qualitative research methods to explore aesthetic education programs in early childhood settings. For example, Lim (2000) explored the features of aesthetic education in early childhood settings in the United States that used the Bank Street, Reggio Emilia, or Waldorf school programs. Liu and Pai (2010) explored Goethe's aesthetics in a Waldorf Kindergarten in Taiwan, while Chen (2007) explored young children's aesthetic experience in an art project, using a project approach to curriculum in an inclusive early childhood program in the United States. These studies revealed that aesthetic education can be implemented through school programs, such as the Bank Street, Reggio Emilia, and Waldorf school programs, as well as through a project. Their commonality is that art<sup>1</sup> and aesthetics are valued in school programs and are supported by the teachers.

Some researchers have studied the effects of aesthetic education programs on young children. For example, Acer and Ömerođlu (2008) conducted a quasi-experimental research study to investigate the effects of an aesthetic education program on young children's aesthetic judgment in Turkey. The 6-year-old children in the experimental group took part in an aesthetic education program, which consisted of 20 learning activities on art criticism through various art modes—visual arts, music, and drama. The findings showed that there was a significant difference in the boys' aesthetic judgement in the experimental group.

In addition to the studies above, some researchers applied action research to study their implementation of aesthetic curricula using specific art media, such as drama, and visual arts (e.g. Cheng, 2016; Lo & Lin, 2010). Some researchers have applied a thematic approach to implementing the thematic curricula with the integration of the aesthetic

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<sup>1</sup> Art here refers to various forms of art, such as music, visual arts, drama, or dance.

domain and other learning domains (e.g. Chou, 2016; Kuo, 2015). These studies revealed young children's aesthetic learning process or aesthetic abilities. They also showed early childhood teachers' professional growth in aesthetic teaching.

As shown above, early childhood aesthetic education programs can be implemented through specific school programs which emphasize aesthetics in education, such as the Waldorf and Reggio Emilia programs. Some can be implemented through the learning of the arts, such as visual arts, music, and drama, while others can be implemented through a project approach or a thematic approach in an integrated curriculum. Some studies have also showed the positive effects of aesthetic education programs on young children or teachers' professional growth (e.g. Acer & Ömerođlu, 2008; Lo & Lin, 2010; Kuo, 2015). Since early childhood teachers in Taiwan are familiar with the thematic approach<sup>2</sup>, I led the teachers in this study to apply a thematic approach to implementing an aesthetic thematic curriculum in their preschool classroom.

### **Purpose of the Study and Research Questions**

Using collaborative action research, the purpose of this study was to investigate the practice of implementing an aesthetic thematic curriculum in a preschool. I served as a curriculum consultant and co-teacher to teach with early childhood teachers in a mixed-age class. The participants were 22 young children aged three to five. The research questions are as follows.

1. How do the co-teachers develop the aesthetic thematic curriculum?
2. What is the influence of the aesthetic thematic curriculum on the young children's aesthetic abilities?
3. What professional development do the co-teachers promote in aesthetic teaching?

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<sup>2</sup> A thematic approach is developed through the process of webbing and integrating different learning areas under one theme. A theme develops important concepts and learning activities in different learning areas, such as language, cognition, social studies, emotion, aesthetic, and body motion and health (MOE, 2015).

## **Methodology**

Action research is concerned with social practices, problem solving, and improvement in a reflective process (Kember, 2000). Collaborative action research involves more than one researcher on a research team (Chen, 1998). It is a process that enables teachers to improve their practice and profession as well as to improve students learning (Sagor, 1992). This study applied the idea of collaboration among an expert and in-service teachers (Grundy, 1988). In order to help early childhood teachers to improve the quality of aesthetic teaching and to benefit young children's aesthetic learning, I applied collaborative action research methods and collaborated with two early childhood teachers to implement an aesthetic thematic curriculum in a preschool class. The participants were 22 young children. The research design is explained as follows.

### **Sites and Participants**

The criteria for choosing a preschool setting in this study include (a) attention to arts education for young children; (b) willingness to improve the quality of aesthetic education through the arts for young children. I invited Ms. Chou (pseudonym), a former graduate student of mine, and her preschool to participate in this study. Ms. Chou used to consult me with her preschool curricula. She showed her high interest in promoting the quality of aesthetic education for young children. Below is the description of Ms. Chou's preschool.

Sunshine Elementary School Applied Preschool (pseudonym) is located in Sunshine Village in Chiayi County, Taiwan. Like other villages in the neighborhood, Sunshine Village is famous for its pineapple farms. Because it is close to two universities, there are many restaurants in the community. There was only one mixed-age class in the preschool with two early childhood teachers (including Ms. Chou) and one child-care worker. The participants were 22 young children aged three to five, including 12 boys and 10 girls, of whom 11 were aged five, six were aged four, and five were aged three. Their parents' occupations were diverse, including farmers, manual labors, doctors, teachers, restaurant owners, and so on.

### **Research Team Members in Collaboration**

I served as a curriculum consultant and co-teacher with two early childhood teachers. Ms. Chou, the main teacher, was an experienced preschool teacher with 30 years of teaching experience and a Master's degree in early childhood education in my university. Ms. Wu (pseudonym) was also an experienced preschool teacher who had 20 years of teaching experience and a Bachelor degree in early childhood education. They both loved art and expected to improve the quality of aesthetic education in their preschool.

As a curriculum consultant, I led the two teachers to design the thematic curriculum web and discuss the curriculum content and problems with them. I also served as a co-teacher, teaching music activities and certain visual arts activities. In addition to co-teaching, I assisted the two teachers and observed their teaching in class. The preschool teachers and I reflected on the teaching, and planned and modified the learning activities every week. The action research cycle of planning, action, observing, and reflecting was employed in this study.

### **Data Collection**

This study was conducted in the second semester of the academic year of 2014, that is, March 2015 through July 2015. Ethics approval was obtained from the preschool. Data sources included (a) two semi-structured and open-ended interviews with the teachers; (b) 16 participant observations of classroom activities; (c) notes on curriculum discussion; (d) teaching reflection notes; (e) teaching comments; (f) children's aesthetic ability assessment; and (g) children's artwork and worksheets. The observations were photographed, videotaped, or sound-recorded. The formal interviews were recorded and transcribed.

### **Measurement**

In order to get a better understanding of the effects of an aesthetic thematic curriculum on children's aesthetic ability, the children's aesthetic ability assessment was employed in this study. The children's aesthetic ability assessment was on a three-point rating scale. Higher scores indicate a stronger degree of aesthetic ability. The content of assessment was

based on the three dimensions of aesthetic abilities in the aesthetic domain in the *Curriculum Framework* (MOE, 2012). The assessment consisted of three parts, including three items relating to the dimension of perceiving and exploring, eight relating to the dimension of performing and creating, and six relating to the dimension of responding and appreciating. As for content validity, one professor in early childhood education and one preschool educator examined the assessment and provided feedback. The internal consistency reliability for the total assessment, measured by Cronbach's alpha, was .865.

### **Data Analysis**

The qualitative data were analyzed by coding and categorizing. Some issues emerged in the process, such as the emergent activity, the flexibility in curriculum design, and problems of responding to and appreciating the role play. The quantitative data of aesthetic ability assessment were analyzed using the SPSS 18.0 program. A paired samples *t*-test was conducted to compare the scores of the children's aesthetic abilities in the pre- and post-tests.

The data were triangulated using methodological triangulation (e.g. observation and interview) and data source triangulation (e.g. observation records, interview transcripts, teaching reflection notes, and children's aesthetic ability assessment). The main co-teacher, Ms. Chou, was invited to do member checking, such as checking the Chinese/English interview transcripts. All the participants' names are pseudonyms.

## **Findings**

### **The Development of the Aesthetic Thematic Curriculum**

The aesthetic thematic curriculum was developed based on the young children's life experiences of going to the restaurants in the community. They also had experiences of cooking and constructing a small breakfast shop in their prior thematic curriculum, "Food." After a discussion on children's prior learning experiences, the teachers and I decided to develop the new thematic curriculum on the topic of "Beautiful Restaurants." Keeping the



goal of aesthetic education in mind, we expected the young children to develop their aesthetic abilities and five senses through seeing, hearing, tasting, smelling, and touching. Ms. Chou reflected,

The new thematic curriculum... is expanded from the last thematic curriculum Food. The children learned about the food and constructed a small breakfast shop in the theme of "Food." We extended the learning of food to the restaurant. (Teaching reflection by Chou, 06/06/2015)

As a curriculum consultant and co-teacher, I guided the teachers to apply a thematic approach and refer to the *Temporary Edition of Early Childhood Education and Care Curriculum Framework*<sup>3</sup> (MOE, 2012) to design the thematic web. The theme was used to organize the concepts and activities in various learning domains. The learning indicators in different learning domains from the *Curriculum Framework* provided guidance for the activity design. At the beginning of the curriculum design, we created the teachers' thematic web. We invited the young children to brainstorm ideas regarding the topic of "Beautiful Restaurants," and guided them to create their own thematic web. We then integrated the children's and teachers' ideas in the thematic curriculum web. In the process of curriculum implementation, some activities were suggested or canceled by the teachers and children. Overall, the concepts consisted of four key questions, namely "What restaurants have you been to? What is inside the restaurant? How can you build a beautiful restaurant? What manners are appropriate in a restaurant?" Each concept was related to different learning activities. For instance, for the concept of "What restaurants have you been to?" the teachers invited the children to share their experiences of going to restaurants and asked them to draw the restaurants they had been to, which was related to the social studies and aesthetic domains. The teachers also took the children to visit restaurants in the community, which was related to the social studies domain. The children voted for their favorite restaurant in the community and drew it on the worksheet, which was related to the cognition and aesthetic domains. They also made models of the community restaurants with small boxes, which was related to the aesthetic domain.

In summary, there were four concepts and 26 learning activities in the thematic

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<sup>3</sup> This study was conducted in 2015, and therefore, the teachers and I referred to the *Temporary Edition of Early Childhood Education and Care Curriculum Framework* (MOE, 2012).

curriculum web (Figure 1). The learning domains of aesthetic, language, social studies, body motion and health, and cognition were integrated into the thematic curriculum. The integrated learning domains helped the children learn about the topic and concepts. Because the aesthetic thematic curriculum aimed to enhance the children’s aesthetic abilities, more aesthetic activities were incorporated into the curriculum. In short, the children explored and visited the community restaurants. They were divided into three groups and applied various arts media to construct three restaurants, including a hot pot restaurant, a coffee restaurant, and a café. They further learned to make and taste their own food and drinks. They also demonstrated their good manners in the restaurants. Finally, they invited their parents and the principal to enjoy their food and music performance in their model restaurants on the display day.

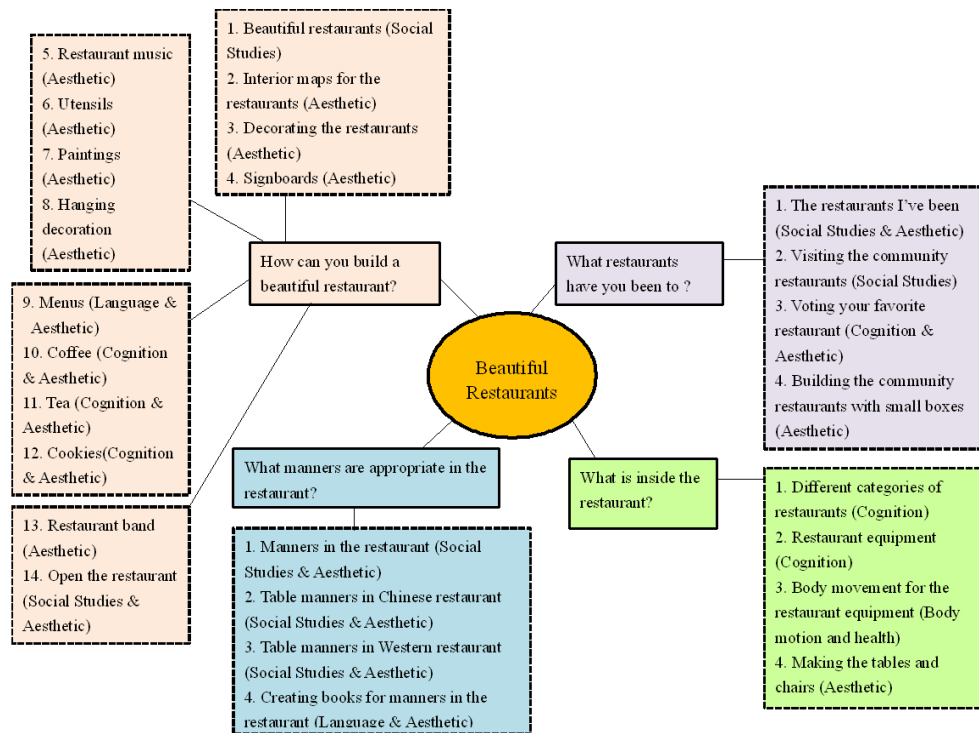


Figure 1. Thematic Curriculum Web

## Young Children's Aesthetic Abilities

There were three dimensions of the children's aesthetic abilities, namely exploring and perceiving, performing and creating, and responding and appreciating. They are discussed as follows.

**Exploring and perceiving.** According to the aesthetic domain in the *Curriculum Framework*, the aesthetic ability of “exploring and perceiving” means that young children perceive and explore the living environment with their senses (MOE, 2012). In this study, the children explored and perceived different restaurants in the community. For example, Ms. Chou and Ms. Wu took them to visit restaurants in the community. Ms. Chou shared how they perceived the features of different restaurants during their visit.

We first introduced the shop signs, and then the street views... We talked about the signboard, entrance, and equipment in the restaurant... And the children found that... “Teacher, this shop is all blue. That shop is all green. The restaurant is blue and the drink shop is green.” The children perceived the features of different restaurants. (Interview I, 04/24/2015)



Figure 2. Ying's Worksheet

Moreover, many children voted for the hot pot restaurant as their favorite restaurant in the community. They drew their favorite restaurants and shared their ideas on the worksheet. Some explained why they voted for the hot pot restaurant. For instance, some recalled their experiences of enjoying the food, while others mentioned the nice environment, such as the cleanliness and beautiful decorations. As Ying, a boy, explained,

My favorite restaurant is the hot pot restaurant. There are hot pots, popcorn, and ice cream in the restaurant. There are lamps and jigsaw puzzles (paintings) inside the restaurant. There are parrots and birds outside. I think the hot pot restaurant is beautiful and very clean. (Ying's worksheet, 04/21/2015)

**Performing and creating.** The aesthetic ability of “performing and creating” means that young children apply various forms of art media and imagination to perform and create artworks (MOE, 2012). In this study, the children applied a variety of materials to construct their three ‘restaurants’ by making signboards, tables, chairs, paintings, decorations, menus, food and drinks, and music (Figure 3). They then performed a role play with the props and equipment in their restaurant learning area, as well as music performances at the opening ceremony of their model restaurants.



*Figure 3. Decorations in the Children's Restaurant*

For example, in the group activity of making tables and chairs in the restaurant, the teachers provided the children with various art materials. One group made a table and chairs with recycled cardboard boxes. They set the table with a tablecloth, flowers, plastic

cups and bowls, and spoons (Figure 4). They also decorated the chairs with colorful paper cutting. During this process, Ms. Chou encouraged them to think about how to decorate the tables and chairs by saying, “You have to discuss the shapes, colors, and decoration of the tables and chairs. Think about what materials you’re going to use” (Observation 5, 04/22/2015). She finally praised them by saying, “It looks so beautiful” (Observation 5, 04/22/2015).

In the concluding activity, the children invited their parents and the principal to enjoy their food and drinks in their restaurants on the display day. The children were divided into three groups, one for each restaurant, a hot pot restaurant, a coffee restaurant, and a café. Each group played the roles of restaurant owner, cashier, waiter or waitress, and cook. They also presented music performances with singing and dancing at the opening ceremony.



Figure 4. The Children’s Table, Chairs, and Decorations

**Responding and appreciating.** The aesthetic ability of responding and appreciating means that young children express their feelings and preferences for various forms of art creation and performance (MOE, 2012). In this study, the children learned to describe the features of their artwork and the music they listened to, but had fewer opportunities to respond to the role plays.

At the beginning of the lesson, the children shared their drawings by describing the content with short sentences, such as “I drew a restaurant. We sat in front of the table.” With the teacher’s guidance, the children learned to describe the content of the artwork and the art media they used. For example, Ming shared his group artwork (Figure 5) by saying, “We made the hot pot menu. We have pumpkin hot pot, milk hot pot... We used black pen

to draw the pot and food, and colorful pens to write words, and crayons and watercolor ... We decorated it with glitter. They make the menu beautiful” (Observation 12, 05/18/2015).

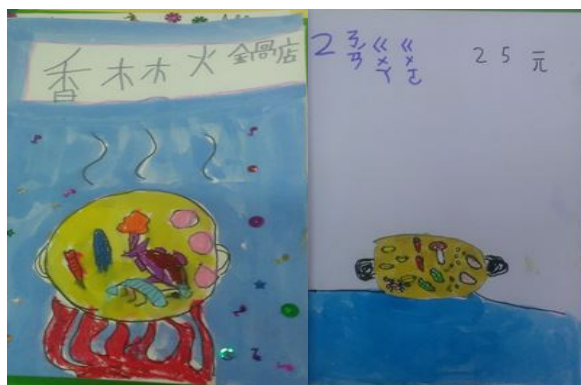


Figure 5. Hot Pot Menu

When listening to music, the children learned to describe the features of the music, shared their feelings about it, and expressed their preferences. For example, when I guided the children to listen to the background music, they shared what they heard, such as ukulele, guitar, and children’s voices (timbre), loudness (dynamics), and fast speed (tempo). Furthermore, they shared their feelings about the music, such as happy, great, cheerful, and joyful. They also expressed their preference for a cheerful song.

Researcher: What did you hear in the second piece of music?

Wei: Singing.

Researcher: Who is singing? Adults or kids?

Wei: Kids.

Researcher: Yes, kids... What else?

Children: Ukulele.

Po: I know it’s a guitar.

Researcher: Yes, it’s a guitar. The guitar is bigger. The ukulele is smaller. They look very similar.

Does the music sound loud or soft? Raise your hands if it’s loud.

Researcher: OK. Almost all children raised their hands. How about the tempo? Does it sound fast or slow?

Children: Fast.

Researcher: What do you feel about the music?  
Hong: Very happy!  
Pai: Very happy!  
Researcher: Does anyone have different answers?  
Tong: It sounds great!  
Wei: Very cheerful.  
Yu: Very joyful.  
Researcher: OK. Very good...

Finally, the researcher asked the children which piece of music they would prefer to listen to in a restaurant. Most chose the second piece, featuring cheerful children's voices.

(Observation 6, 05/11/2015)

Regarding the children's responses to and appreciation of the role play, they had fewer opportunities to reflect. Ms. Chou invited the children to role play by acting as a restaurant owner and customers in their constructed restaurants. However, the children only shared what role they played and what they acted in the reflection activity. In general, the older children performed better than the younger children in terms of their response and appreciation. Ms. Chou was appreciative that "the younger children improved by responding with simple words and showing their willingness to participate" (Interview II, 06/24/2015).

Additionally, a paired samples *t*-test was conducted to compare the scores of the children's aesthetic abilities in the pre- and post-tests. The results presented in Table 1 show the significant differences in the children's aesthetic abilities ( $t=-8.500, p< .001$ ). The mean score for aesthetic abilities in the post-test ( $M=2.190, SD=.237$ ) was higher than that in the pre-test ( $M=1.898, SD=.196$ ). In the aspect of exploring and perceiving, there was also a significant difference ( $t =-11.014, p < .001$ ), with the mean score in the post-test ( $M=2.546, SD=.242$ ) higher than that in the pre-test ( $M=1.985, SD=.071$ ). In the aspect of performing and creating, there was another significant difference ( $t=-6.859, p< .001$ ), with the mean score in the post-test ( $M=2.239, SD=.212$ ) higher than that in the pre-test ( $M=1.949, SD=.107$ ). Likewise, in the aspect of responding and appreciating, there was a significant difference ( $t =-2.719, p< .05$ ), with the mean score in the post-test ( $M=1.947,$

$SD=.376$ ) higher than that in the pre-test ( $M=1.788$ ,  $SD=.406$ ). In summary, the aesthetic thematic curriculum had a significant positive influence on the children's aesthetic abilities.

Table 1. *Analysis of the Mean Scores of the Pre- and Post-tests (N=22)*

Aspects	Test	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i>
Exploring & Perceiving	Pretest	1.985	.071	-11.014***
	Posttest	2.546	.242	
Performing & Creating	Pretest	1.949	.107	-6.859***
	Posttest	2.239	.221	
Responding & Appreciating	Pretest	1.788	.406	-2.719*
	Posttest	1.947	.376	
Total	Pretest	1.898	.196	-8.500***
	Posttest	2.190	.237	

\*  $p<.05$  \*\*\*  $p<.001$

### Teacher's Professional Development in Aesthetic Teaching

Through the collaborative action research, the teachers and I improved the professional development in aesthetic teaching, especially in the aesthetic thematic curriculum design and teaching practices, described as follows.

**Be flexible in aesthetic thematic curriculum design.** In the curriculum design, the teachers and I organized the thematic curriculum web, referred to the *Curriculum Framework* (MOE, 2012), and discussed the details of learning activities on a weekly basis. However, some activities emerged or were canceled in the process of curriculum implementation. For example, two groups of children had the idea of constructing a coffee restaurant and a café, and therefore, the teachers and children decided to make coffee, tea, and cookies. Keeping the aesthetic goal in mind, the teachers and I guided the children to use their senses to observe and touch the coffee beans and tea leaves, and smell and taste the coffee and tea. Ms. Chou also found that she improved her professional ability in curriculum design through our curriculum discussion, especially the connection of activities in the curriculum. As she said,



I learned a lot from the curriculum implementation. Through discussing the curriculum content deeply...we also paid attention to the connection of activities in the curriculum... If we had not discussed the curriculum deeply, we teachers would have just taught it and the children would not have learned so much. (Curriculum discussion note, 05/13/2015)

For me, it was important to have flexibility in curriculum design in the preschool. I was grateful for the emergent and meaningful activities which emerged in the curriculum. However, I learned to accept the cancelation of some important activities. For example, we planned to visit and interview one child's parents who were the owners of a restaurant in the community, but it was canceled due to the teachers' tight schedule.

It was a pity that we canceled the plan to visit Tong's parents' restaurant and interview her parents. The teachers did not have enough time to take the children... I have to learn to be flexible with them. (Teaching reflection by Researcher, 04/27/2015)

**Improve aesthetic teaching skills by aesthetic inquiry.** In aesthetic teaching practices, the co-teachers improved their aesthetic teaching skills by aesthetic inquiry. For example, at the beginning of the lesson, the teachers invited the children to share their drawings, and the children usually described what they drew using short sentences. Through the curriculum discussion, the teachers learned to apply the aesthetic elements to raise questions and guide the children to describe their artwork. For example, Ms. Chou invited the children to share their menus by saying, "Please talk about your menu. What materials did you use to make it? What colors did you use? What is the menu about?" (Observation 12, 05/19/2015).

As for me, I also improved my teaching skills in aesthetic guidance, especially for music. I found that the children enjoyed the music appreciation activity. When I played the restaurant background music, they concentrated on listening to it, moved their bodies, and responded to what they heard. They were eager to respond to my questions regarding the timbre, dynamics, and tempo, as well as their feelings about the music.

The children enjoyed the music appreciation activity. They also responded to the questions I raised, such as the questions about timbre, loudness or softness, tempo, and feelings in the music. In the first

piece of music listening, I found that they did not move much, but they concentrated on the listening and said, “it is soft,” “it became louder,” “it’s a piano,” and “it’s a violin.” The second piece was a Tsou Aboriginal song with guitar accompaniment. Some children clapped their hands. Some said, “It’s a ukulele,” and then pretended to play the instrument. They seemed to enjoy the music very much. (Teaching reflection by Researcher, 05/11/2015)

However, the children had fewer opportunities to respond to and appreciate the role play. The preschool teachers only invited them to share what role they played and what they acted. In the teaching comment, I suggested that the teachers provide more guidance to help the children discuss the characters, props, costumes, and some drama elements in the drama appreciation.

I suggest that the teacher lead the children to discuss the characters, props, dress, etc. after the role play. The teacher can also invite the audience to vote for the best actor and actress. (Teaching comment by Researcher, 5/25/2015)

Additionally, the teachers paid more attention to providing the aesthetic environment and atmosphere for the children in the classroom. For example, they played the background music during lunch time. They provided various art materials in the learning center and encouraged the children to use different materials to create artworks. Moreover, they decorated the classroom with a variety of the children’s artworks.

## Discussion

This study investigated the practice of implementing an aesthetic thematic curriculum in a preschool in Taiwan. Here I discuss some issues in response to the three research questions.

Bruner pointed out that, “learning and thinking are always *situated* in a cultural setting and always dependent upon the utilization of cultural resources” (Bruner, 1996, p. 4). In this study, the preschool teachers and I selected the theme of “Beautiful Restaurants” based on the young children’s life experiences of going to community restaurants and their experiences of cooking and constructing a breakfast shop in the prior thematic curriculum,

“Food.” Following the *Curriculum Framework* (MOE, 2012), we applied a thematic approach to integrating the aesthetic domain and other learning domains in the aesthetic thematic curriculum. Although the teachers guided the children to explore and perceive different restaurants in the community during the fieldwork, there was insufficient use of local resources in this study. It was a pity that they missed the opportunity to visit a restaurant managed by one of the children’s parents. According to the teaching principles in the aesthetic domain in the *Curriculum Framework*, early childhood educators are encouraged to utilize local cultural and arts resources in the community along with the support of children’s parents (MOE, 2012, 2016). It is suggested that teachers provide more opportunities for children to visit the restaurants in the community and invite children’s parents to share their experiences of managing the restaurant.

As for children’s aesthetic abilities, both the qualitative and quantitative data showed the children’s improvement in three dimensions, namely exploring and perceiving, performing and creating, and responding and appreciating. In terms of exploring and perceiving, the children explored and perceived different restaurants in the community; in terms of performing and creating, they applied various materials to construct their restaurants; in terms of responding and appreciating, they learned to describe the features of their artworks and appreciated their peers’ artworks. However, the average score on the dimension of responding and appreciating was lower. The qualitative data showed that they had fewer opportunities to respond to and appreciate their role play or drama performances. The co-teacher seemed to be weaker in guiding the children to respond to and appreciate the drama. Chen (2014) also found that Taiwanese early childhood educators had lower average scores on guiding children to appreciate drama with artistic elements. It is recommended that early childhood educators provide more opportunities for children to respond to their role plays by aesthetic inquiry, by prompting them with such questions as, “What roles did they play?” “What did you notice about the props and background?” “What happened to the main actor?” “How do you feel about it?” “What is the most interesting thing to you?” Chen (2014) and Lim (2000) also suggested that early childhood teachers apply artistic elements to guide young children to experience and appreciate the beauty of art.

Through collaborative action research, the preschool teachers and I promoted the

professional development in aesthetic thematic curriculum design and aesthetic teaching skills. On reflection, I realized that a teacher's scaffolding plays a very important role in supporting children's aesthetic learning. The scaffolding of materials and language are relatively important in aesthetic education. The children can learn to explore, create, and perform different modes of art with a variety of materials. They can make more aesthetic responses if teachers provide more language guidance in aesthetic inquiry and language support in aesthetic dialogue. Lim (2005) pointed out that early childhood teachers can provide appropriate and various art materials, value the process of art making, and create a safe atmosphere by asking stimulating questions to encourage young children. Lin (2015) further suggested that early childhood educators collaborate with young children to construct an aesthetic environment and a learning situation relevant to the theme of a thematic curriculum.

### **Conclusion & Recommendations**

Using collaborative action research, this study investigated the practice of implementing an aesthetic thematic curriculum in a preschool in Taiwan. The major findings are listed as follows. (1) The aesthetic thematic curriculum was developed based on young children's life experiences in the community restaurants. The preschool teachers and I applied a thematic approach to integrating the aesthetic domain and other learning domains in the aesthetic thematic curriculum focusing on the topic of "Beautiful Restaurants." (2) The young children's aesthetic abilities were developed in the three dimensions. In terms of exploring and perceiving, they explored and perceived different restaurants in the community. In terms of performing and creating, they applied various materials to construct their restaurants. In terms of responding and appreciating, they learned to describe the features of their artworks and appreciated their peers' artworks. Moreover, there was a significant difference in the children's aesthetic abilities in the assessment. (3) The preschool teachers and I promoted the professionalism in aesthetic curriculum design and aesthetic teaching. For example, we learned to be flexible in aesthetic thematic curriculum design, and improved the aesthetic teaching skills by aesthetic inquiry.

Some recommendations can be made for future directions. First, early childhood educators are encouraged to implement aesthetic thematic curricula based on young children's life experiences and the *Early Childhood Education and Care Curriculum Framework* (MOE, 2016). It is also important to utilize local cultural and arts resources in the community and to provide more opportunities for young children to explore and perceive the beauty of their living environment. Secondly, early childhood educators could be good models of aesthetic perceivers and aesthetic practitioners for young children (Lin, 2015). They are encouraged to perceive the beauty in the environment and everyday life, share their aesthetic experiences with children, and attend workshops on aesthetic education and arts appreciation. Thirdly, it is suggested that early childhood educators conduct action research with university professors or on their own to improve their aesthetic teaching. It is expected that this research will be helpful to personnel in early childhood education and aesthetic education.

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