

Research on Preschool-Primary School Transition Education Based on Dewey's Experiential Theory

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ABSTRACT

The experiential accumulation in the five major areas of kindergarten and the knowledge acquisition in primary school subjects differ significantly in both educational content and teaching methods. The gradient between these two educational stages requires transition education to help children mitigate the learning slope. Dewey's experiential education theory clarifies and reshapes the concept of "experience," aiming to balance the contradictions in traditional education. From the perspective of Dewey's experiential theory, this paper explores the feasibility of preschool-primary school transition education based on the characteristics of experience and proposes practical logic at the theoretical level: defining the starting and ending points of education, following the "map" for a poetic journey, and encouraging children to interact with the environment.

Keywords: Dewey, Preschool-primary school transition, Children's experience.

1. INTRODUCTION

The organic connection between educational stages is an essential part of a high-quality education system, and the preschool-primary school transition is a necessary reflection of this system. The report of the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China emphasized the need to continue efforts in ensuring child care and education, demonstrating the determination of the Party and the state in promoting scientific preschool-primary school transition work. With the increasing attention to the quality of preschool-primary school transition, educational policy documents in China have begun to emphasize this aspect as well as the development of early reading abilities in young children. The "Guidelines for the Quality Assessment of Kindergarten Care and Education," issued in February 2022, mentioned in the assessment points of "activity organization" in the "education process" that attention should be paid to the continuity of children's development and the importance of scientific preschool-primary school transition.

There are significant differences in teaching content and organization between kindergartens and primary schools. Kindergartens divide educational content into five major areas: health, language,

society, science, and art, emphasizing the acquisition of core experiences in these areas through activities and games. In contrast, primary schools categorize knowledge into subjects and emphasize systematic knowledge acquisition in classroom teaching. Since children's learning and development are continuous processes, preschool-primary school transition not only bridges educational stages but also different phases of children's development. This requires joint efforts from both kindergartens and primary schools to achieve "two-way transition."

Dewey's experiential theory, rooted in pragmatism, criticizes and inherits the experiential ideas of classical and modern philosophy, attempting to reconcile various opposing viewpoints in new and old education, reshape experiential education, and promote the growth of children's experiences. Viewing preschool-primary school transition education through Dewey's experiential theory can help clarify the relationship between experience and knowledge, grasp the inherent connections between experiential theory and preschool-primary school transition education, and endow it with the "naturalism of experience."

2. CLARIFICATION OF DEWEY'S EXPERIENTIAL THEORY

Dewey's experiential theory is the core of his entire philosophical system and educational thought. Dewey's definition of experience is first built on the critical inheritance of the "dualism" in traditional philosophy. He criticizes that Greek and modern philosophy failed to effectively integrate practice and thought, pointing out that experience is the result of the interaction between the organism and the environment, containing the organism's active attempts and environmental constraints.

2.1 "Unity" Rather Than "Dualism" — Dewey's Clarification of "Experience"

Dewey believes that Greek scholars like Socrates and the Sophists emphasized "knowing oneself" to gain universal significance, which ignored the continuity and naturalness of experience. Plato regarded experience as an unreliable representation of things, with knowledge being the true pursuit of the mind. In Dewey's view, this metaphysical thinking severed the connection between experience and the knowable world. Aristotle contrasted experience and reason, asserting that reason dominates everything, placing experience second to reason.

In modern philosophy, there are different interpretations of "experience" between rationalism and empiricism. Rationalist Descartes believed that only experience derived from "I think" could gain the trust of all senses and become true knowledge. Hegel highly esteemed the rational necessity in the absolute spirit, promoting the value of reason. Dewey argued that these views, while recognizing the enlightening value of experience in understanding the world, tended to exclude experience from reason, neglecting the influence of action practice, emotion, morality, and intellect on rational knowledge. Conversely, empiricist Locke equated sensation with experience, believing that individual cognition stems from grasping the external world beyond the mind, with all understandable things derived from experience. Dewey contended that this lacked a proper recognition of the value of the rational world and failed to see the importance of individuals actively understanding experience through "doing."

Dewey posited that the concept of experience in classical philosophy could not represent true experience because it excluded the value of the non-rational world in experience and the factors of

real-world changes¹. In the eyes of modern philosophers, "experience" became polarized, placing experience and knowledge in opposition, blurring the boundaries between the material and spiritual worlds.

Dewey described experience as "a flowing river, a continuous change, yet with its axis and direction."² Experience is a multi-layered, fluid whole with both temporal and historical dimensions. Experience is not static, as individuals continuously develop experience through proactive interventions in and passive constraints from the environment. This conception of experience escapes the traditional philosophical dilemma of detachment from reality, making experience practical, moral, emotional, and unified.

2.2 Seeking the "Middle Way" in Education — Balancing Knowledge and Experience

Dewey, as a representative of progressive education, has his new "three-center" theory often misunderstood as a total denial and opposition to the traditional "three-center" theory. However, Dewey emphasizes a "middle way" in education, balancing teachers and students, textbooks and activities, knowledge transmission, and discovery exploration. Scholars like Tu Shixuan and Hu Zhongping pointed out that Dewey's view does not place knowledge and activities in binary opposition but sees them as continuous and unified³. Ding Daoyong argued that reducing Dewey's educational thought to merely "child-centered" is biased, stating that Dewey's discussions on children and curriculum aim to build effective connections between the starting point of teaching (children) and the end point (curriculum), rather than solely focusing on protecting children.⁴ Dewey proposed that "in all uncertain situations, there is one permanent thing we can rely on, the organic relationship between education and personal

1. Zhao Menglei. How Is the Transformation of Experience Possible? — The Formation Characteristics and Values of Dewey's Experiential Education [J]. Higher Education Exploration, 2022(7): 92-98.

2. John Dewey. Experience and Nature [M] translated by Fu Tongxian. Beijing: Commercial Press, 2015: p. 247.

3. Tu Shixuan, Hu Zhongping. Beyond the Binary Opposition of Knowledge and Activity — A Reinterpretation of Dewey's Teaching Thought [J]. Higher Education Research, 2011(07): 24-31.

4. Ding Daoyong. Children Are Not the Center — A Reinterpretation of Dewey's Teaching Thought [J]. Global Education Outlook, 2016, 45(11): 110-128.

experience,"⁵ hence the need for a theory of experience. Children's experiences should be the starting point of teaching, and these experiences are not chaotic but multi-layered. Focusing on children's current experiences does not mean being content with their current level but recognizing the potential within those experiences for achieving higher levels.⁶ The unity of teachers and students, and knowledge and experience, is key to students' growth and individual development. As Dewey emphasized, experience is the unity of "doing" and "undergoing."

3. PRESCHOOL-PRIMARY SCHOOL TRANSITION EDUCATION UNDER DEWEY'S EXPERIENTIAL THEORY

Under Dewey's experiential theory, traditional views on knowledge and children have been transformed, aiming to reconcile various contradictions in education. Dewey's educational philosophy provides valuable guidance for teaching. The characteristics of "experience" with continuity and integrity provide a feasible logical basis for implementing preschool-primary school transition education, ensuring the growth of children's experiences.

3.1 The Characteristics of Experience Provide a Feasible Logic for Transition Education

In Dewey's experiential theory, experience is embedded in the continuously developing daily life, with an ongoing growth and development drive. Dewey believed that "education is growth," which means the growth of experience.

Experience has continuity. Dewey inherited part of Darwin's theory of evolution and criticized the dualism in traditional education, believing that the development of experience is continuous. Dewey divided the process of experience development into "primary experience" and "reflective experience" (or "refined experience"). "Primary experience" is the meaningful experience in daily life, flowing smoothly over time as our daily routine, rough and unprocessed. Once primary experience encounters

obstacles, people begin to reflect on it and seek solutions, transforming primary experience from rough to refined and orderly. Thus, "reflective experience" is a higher-level experience embedded with reflective thinking, a specialized or theoretical experience that not only reflects on the past but also serves as a foundation for current and future modifications or innovations. Knowledge is the continuously evolving experience in human history, logically and systematically verified.

From experience to knowledge, from immaturity to maturity, Dewey described the gap between children and curriculum (knowledge),⁷ primary experience, and reflective experience.⁸ The learning content (experience or knowledge) between kindergarten and primary school also has continuity. Kindergarten education lays the foundation for primary school teaching, and primary school education deepens and expands kindergarten education. Kindergarten education divides children's learning experiences into five major areas (health, language, society, science, art) and integrates them through activities and games to help children achieve learning and development, emphasizing the breadth of experience. In contrast, primary school education categorizes knowledge by subjects and emphasizes depth through specialized teaching. Although the two stages emphasize different learning contents (kindergarten emphasizes experience, primary school emphasizes knowledge), the five major areas of experience can be seen as representations of subject knowledge in children's lives, while subject knowledge is a concentrated, logical, systematic, and abstract theoretical system of the five major areas of experience.

Thus, the learning content of the two stages has significant relevance and continuity. Today, people call for kindergarten education to avoid "primary school-ification" and advocate for "zero-starting-point" education. However, "zero-starting-point" does not mean "no starting point" or "no preparation." Research has shown that school readiness education affects children's adaptation to primary school. Dewey's concept of continuous experience development provides a way to emphasize the transformation and upgrading of children's experiences within and between

5. John Dewey. *How We Think: A Restatement of the Relation of Reflective Thinking to the Educative Process* [M]. Beijing: People's Education Press, p. 248.

6. John Dewey. *The School and Society: The Child and the Curriculum* [M] translated by Zhao Xianglin et al. Beijing: People's Education Press, 2005: p. 118.

7. John Dewey. *The School and Society: The Child and the Curriculum* [M] translated by Zhao Xianglin et al. Beijing: People's Education Press, 2005: p. 113.

8. John Dewey. *Experience and Nature* [M] translated by Fu Tongxian. Beijing: Commercial Press, 2015: pp. 15-19.

educational stages, helping children transition from "experience" to "knowledge."

Experience has integrity. Dewey's experiential theory, influenced by Hegel's holistic view, holds that experiences cannot be isolated but appear in groups, forming a network, a field of meaning.⁹ Simple "stimulus-response" cannot constitute experience; it must be connected with the consequences of behavior to form a meaningful whole and affect the future. Dewey illustrated this with an example: when a child touches fire, if they do not feel pain, they may try again, but pain and the associated emotional response integrate into a whole experience. Instantaneous sensations cannot be considered experiences; only when there is an overall meaning between actions and outcomes can it be called experience.

Dewey's consideration of the integrity of experience extends to preschool-primary school transition education, emphasizing that educators should not focus only on stage-specific development goals but pay attention to the development of chain-like experiences. As Dewey said, "The task of the educator is to arrange experiences that arouse interest and prepare for future experiences, so their role is far greater than simply obtaining any experience."¹⁰

Preschool-primary school transition education helps children adapt from kindergarten's area-based learning to primary school's subject-based learning content. Due to differences in subject structure, knowledge positioning, and teaching methods, there is an "experience-knowledge" gap between the two stages, making the chasm between children's knowledge, primary experience, and reflective experience more pronounced. Dewey's concepts of continuous and integral experience provide a new perspective on preschool-primary school transition education — fully respecting and understanding children's existing experiences, starting from these experiences, and organizing appropriate activities in specific contexts to restore human experiences behind knowledge to forms children can understand and accept. It is important to note that the role of education here is not diminished but enhanced, with teachers collaborating with children.

3.2 Effective Transition Education as a Guarantee for Experience Growth

"Education is the reconstruction or reorganization of experience, which increases the meaning of experience and improves the ability to guide subsequent experiences."¹¹ Children's growth is not spontaneous; it requires guidance. Educators need to see the direction of growth contained within children's experiences and seize educational opportunities to make the transformation of experiences possible. Dewey compared theoretical knowledge to an "exploration map" and rough, unsophisticated experience to an "explorer's notebook." From an experiential theory perspective, preschool-primary school transition education should connect theoretical knowledge with children's experiential world, making knowledge easier for children to understand. If children can glimpse Dewey's "explorer's notebook," the reconstruction or reorganization of experience is ensured.

Traditional education views knowledge as isolated and static. When people do not know how to connect kindergarten experiences with primary school subject knowledge, they fall into the traditional education's systematic and disciplinary trap, narrowly confining children's development to a static period. When people adopt the experiential theory perspective, seeing experience as developing and continuous, each experience provides something for future broader experiences. Thus, preschool-primary school transition education has broader significance and connotation. Transition education should follow the growth trend within children's existing experiences. Effective transition education requires a comprehensive and continuous view of children's experience growth, breaking through the established preschool-primary school transition curriculum framework, and adopting more innovative methods to "psychologize" education. Strengthening the two-way organic connection between preschool and primary education helps children mitigate the transition slope.

9. Chen Yajun. The Background and Structure of Dewey's Experiential Doctrine [J]. Zhejiang Academic Journal, 2022(01): 164-172.

10. John Dewey. How We Think: A Restatement of the Relation of Reflective Thinking to the Educative Process [M]. Beijing: People's Education Press, p. 276.

11. [US] Edited by Bernstein. Dewey on Experience, Nature, and Freedom [M] translated by Zeng Jiyuan. Taipei: Taiwan Commercial Press, 1981.

4. PRACTICAL LOGIC OF PRESCHOOL-PRIMARY SCHOOL TRANSITION EDUCATION BASED ON DEWEY'S EXPERIENTIAL THEORY

The educational characteristics of Dewey's experiential theory provide a feasible logical basis for preschool-primary school transition education, ensuring the transformation and growth of children's experiences. Kindergarten and primary school education are interconnected through experience, forming parts of the children's experiential field. Vertically, children's experiences grow and transition between the two stages, while horizontally, activities and subject curriculum implementations are integrated.¹² Experiential theory offers a new perspective for implementing preschool-primary school transition education.

4.1 Defining Directions and Establishing the Starting and Ending Points of Transition Education

Dewey acknowledged the gap between experience and knowledge and argued that education should recognize the gap between children's (experience) and curriculum (knowledge). Education should not oppose children to systematic knowledge but find connections between them, linking the starting and ending points to help children reach the end of their experience (reflective experience; knowledge). The starting point of education is children's existing experiences. Although these experiences are crude and simple, they contain the seeds of truth and knowledge, forming the foundation for children to reach the endpoint.

For instance, children might not know the physical principle that friction between an object and the ground can propel the object, but they might have the experience that "pushing off with their feet can make a scooter go faster." Northern children might not understand the principle that "water freezes at zero degrees or below," but they may have the experience that "it snows in winter and you can have snowball fights." Children might not fully grasp the sentiment expressed in "Pity the Farmer," but they might understand "taking only as

much food as they can eat." Thus, defining the starting and ending points of education clarifies its sequence and direction, providing guidance for education.

Preschool-primary school transition education also follows this logic. Educators need to understand children's rich personal worlds fully and create transition education contexts, adopting appropriate teaching methods to restore theoretical knowledge to experiences children can understand. Both kindergarten and primary school educators need to understand their internal knowledge systems and those of the other stage to comprehensively understand the connection between experience and knowledge, clarifying the specific reasoning process of knowledge formation and completing the breakdown of experiences. This ensures a meaningful connection between kindergarten area-based teaching and primary school subject-based teaching, safeguarding the breadth and depth of children's learning. This also suggests the need for establishing research platforms between kindergartens and primary schools, providing opportunities for teachers to exchange and understand, and collaboratively supporting children's transition growth.

4.2 Transforming Experience and Conducting Poetic Journeys Following the "Notebook"

Once educators have determined the starting and ending points of transition education, how should they guide children to reach the endpoint? Dewey's concept of the "explorer's notebook" can be borrowed, "psychologizing" knowledge (textbooks), following children's footsteps, and conducting poetic experiential journeys together, step by step, creating an "exploration map." This appropriate method is what Dewey referred to as "psychologizing the curriculum." Specifically, it means restoring abstract, logical knowledge to the psychological level, recontextualizing and concretizing it (experience), restoring "the various parts of the subjects or knowledge to their original experiences."¹³

Kindergartens can focus on horizontal experience expansion for transition education. Kindergarten curriculum emphasizes "everything in a day is a curriculum," valuing the unique role of

12. Fan Jiamei, Li Zhaocun. A Theoretical Path Analysis of the Continuity of Children's Experience Development in Preschool-Primary School Curriculum Transition Based on Dewey's Experiential Philosophy Perspective [J]. Journal of Shaanxi Preschool Teachers College, 2023, 39(09): 1-8.

13. John Dewey. The School and Society: The Child and the Curriculum [M] translated by Zhao Xianglin et al. Beijing: People's Education Press, 2005: p. 122.

life, activities, and games in children's development, integrating various experience accumulations into daily life. Using thematic or project-based curricula, relevant experiences can be comprehensively organized, promoting children's step-by-step experience accumulation and growth. For example, in the large class thematic course "Playing with Numbers," from "self-directed attendance," "number and quantity games," to "number writing" and "my consumption plan," teachers base activities on children's interests and existing experiences, integrating "number" experience accumulation opportunities into daily life, games, activity areas, and group teaching. This helps children gradually accumulate related experiences in counting, measuring, and quantifying, laying a foundational experience for systematic knowledge learning in the first grade of primary school, reducing the transition slope.

Primary education can focus on deepening experiences. Lower grades can bring teaching content and methods closer to children's experiential learning styles (games, activities), softening the boundaries between subjects, helping children gradually adapt to primary school learning rhythms, and more effectively stimulating experiences accumulated in kindergarten for subject teaching. The experiences accumulated and grown in kindergarten might lack logical structure, and primary school transition education needs to re-experience the entire process of human social historical experience evolution and development in a simplified manner.¹⁴ Additionally, it should deepen the construction of meaning, guiding children to grasp systematic knowledge and preparing them for more complex mathematical and scientific knowledge. Children accumulate, transform, and form individual experiences, gaining knowledge through constantly reviewing and connecting the development of human historical experiences.

4.3 Trusting Children and Encouraging Interaction with the Environment

Dewey's principle of interaction is a major principle in explaining the role and power of education. Dewey believed that the formation of experience relies on the interaction between the organism and the environment; "doing" and "suffering" are closely related and form our

14. Xia Shuyu. The Occurrence of Deep Learning from Dewey's "Experience" Theory [J]. *Journal of Sichuan Normal University (Social Science Edition)*, 2020, 47(03): 110-118.

experiences.¹⁵ This overturns the traditional education view that knowledge is transmitted unidirectionally by teachers, asserting that experience formation requires effective two-way communication. Children need "doing" as a medium to connect experience and knowledge to gain knowledge. Thus, in the perspective of experiential theory, children are not passive recipients but active participants with a dominant position in education and teaching.

Children with a dominant position are no longer blank slates, as Locke described, but carriers of rich individual experiences. These crude, inherent experiences form children's characteristics and interests, serving as the starting point of education and the foundation for forming higher-level experiences. Dewey emphasized valuing children's "immature experiences," which, although crude and disordered, imply plasticity and dependence, making the transformation and upgrading of children's experiences possible in preschool-primary school transition education.

The interaction of experiences is key to achieving this transformation.¹⁶ Things themselves do not constitute experiences; they are objects of experience. Only when individuals interact with them and assign them "meaning" do experiences truly form. These experiences will continue to influence things and their outcomes in the future, verified, logical, and systematic, eventually forming complete meanings and presented as knowledge. Since experience is the unity of process and result, content and form, preschool-primary school transition education, as an active adaptation and transformation of experience behavior, has space and opportunities. Education and teaching should allow children to "do," continuously changing the context, methods, and materials of "doing," with teachers acting as friendly "collaborators," helping children connect experiences and knowledge, continuously acquiring, perfecting, and accumulating experiences. Numerous experiences form organic connections, creating a field of meaning.¹⁷ Both kindergartens

15. [US] John Dewey. *Reconstruction in Philosophy* [M] translated by Liu Huachu and Ma Rong. Shanghai: East China Normal University Press, 2019: p. 70.

16. Xia Shuyu. The Occurrence of Deep Learning from Dewey's "Experience" Theory [J]. *Journal of Sichuan Normal University (Social Science Edition)*, 2020, 47(03): 110-118.

17. Chen Yajun. The Background and Structure of Dewey's Experiential Doctrine [J]. *Zhejiang Academic Journal*, 2022(01): 164-172.

and primary schools should "understand, trust, and support children" more.

5. CONCLUSION

In summary, Dewey's experiential theory provides theoretical support for preschool-primary school transition education by emphasizing the continuity and integrity of experiences. Effective transition education should respect and utilize children's existing experiences to facilitate the transition from everyday experiences to academic knowledge, ensuring smooth transitions between different educational stages. This requires close collaboration between preschool and primary school educators to create a coherent educational system that supports children's overall development.

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- [10] Fan Jiamei, Li Zhaocun. A Theoretical Path Analysis of the Continuity of Children's Experience Development in Preschool-Primary School Curriculum Transition Based on Dewey's Experiential Philosophy Perspective [J]. *Journal of Shaanxi Preschool Teachers College*, 2023, 39(09): 1-8.
- [11] Xia Shuyu. The Occurrence of Deep Learning from Dewey's "Experience" Theory [J]. *Journal of Sichuan Normal University (Social Science Edition)*, 2020, 47(03): 110-118.