

A Study on the Practice of Life Education in Animal Rearing Activities for Young Children

Yanzi Long

Hainan Normal University, Haikou, Hainan, China

Abstract: Nowadays, video games and short videos are widely popular among young children and teenagers, blurring the boundaries between virtual and real life for some kids. This can lead to skewed perceptions of life's value, resulting in extreme behaviors such as imitating some bad behaviors, becoming numb to harm, or even engaging in school bullying and self-harm. This highlights the severe lack of life education. In this context, animal care activities in kindergartens serve as an important vehicle for life education, with unique practical value. By feeding and observing small animals, children can develop a direct perception of life, fostering empathy and responsibility. When faced with the life and death of animals, if teachers provide proper guidance, children can form a healthy understanding of life cycles. Therefore, kindergartens should emphasize life education through animal care activities, teaching children to respect and cherish life in daily practice, maintaining reverence for life in the new era.

Keywords: Animal Rearing for Young Children; Life Education

1. Introduction

This study is based on the educational guidance of "Caring for Life" in the "Guidelines for Learning and Development of Children Aged 3-6," focusing on the deep integration practice of animal husbandry activities with life education. [1] The Guidelines propose in the goal of "Scientific Inquiry" to guide children to "get close to nature and enjoy exploration," encouraging them to observe their surroundings more closely, perceive, and discover the living habits and environments of animals. In the section on "Social Adaptation," it requires children to "care for their surroundings and pay attention to resource conservation." Animal husbandry activities can cultivate a sense of

responsibility towards life and awareness of conservation, aligning with the goals of the social domain. These policy requirements provide clear direction for kindergartens in conducting life education through animal husbandry activities. Therefore, this study uses animal husbandry as a vehicle, creating real-life scenarios where children interact directly with living beings, guiding them to observe the growth process of life, experience caregiving responsibilities, and perceive the fragility and uniqueness of life, thereby deepening their understanding of the essence of "caring for life." "Children have an innate emotional connection with animals; they care for animals just as they would care for themselves." [2] The birth, death, and typical behaviors of animals can all serve as educational opportunities for teachers. Raising animals in kindergartens is one of the common methods used by early educators to implement animal education, whose educational value has long been recognized. [3] Compared to plant cultivation activities, which also involve unidirectional growth feedback, animal husbandry activities have the characteristic of bidirectional emotional interaction with children. Children easily form deep bonds with animals. Whenever the food they place attracts small animals to compete for it, the children are greatly encouraged. Even when an animal pecks at their little hands, they feel it is a sign of the animal's "love." This emotional connection allows children to truly experience the joy of interacting with animals. In contrast, life interactions in plant cultivation activities are one-way and delayed. For example, the feedback from watering and fertilizing is merely physical changes such as sprouting and growing, lacking timely emotional responses. Therefore, animal care activities better enable children to appreciate the uniqueness of life and foster a sense of responsibility towards caring for living beings. Based on this, this article uses a literature review method to delve into how animal care activities in kindergartens

effectively carry the goal of life education, and how differences in ethical awareness among teachers, children, and parents during animal care influence educational outcomes.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Research Status of Children's Life Education

Life education, as a crucial topic in global basic education reform, aims to help young children understand the value of life, respect ecological relationships, and cultivate a sense of social responsibility through multidimensional guidance in cognition, emotion, and ethics. [5] The international academic community generally believes that its core practical approaches can be divided into two categories: the first is to establish empathy for living beings through frequent contact with plants and animals and participation in ecological activities, such as the "forest schools" promoted in Nordic countries, which strengthen children's awareness of coexistence with nature through outdoor exploration; the second is to embed views on life and death and food ethics within cultural traditions. Food education in Japan not only encompasses universal human cultures like life, nature, and gratitude but also specific aspects of daily life culture, such as balance, cooperation, and dietary habits, making it distinctive in global food education. Japanese people believe that food education is life education, teaching children the true flavor of food and passing down their reverence for nature. [6] In 2005, the Japanese government enacted the Basic Law on Food Education, integrating life education into culinary culture and emphasizing the entire process experience from food production to consumption. Food education has thus been positioned as an important foundation for all-round development in moral, intellectual, and physical aspects, serving as a fundamental pathway to cultivate "survival skills" adapted to rapid social changes. Its content has expanded from school meals to broader comprehensive education for all citizens, involving the dissemination of knowledge related to diet and health, skill enhancement, and practical life experiences. [7] For example, activities such as growing vegetables and raising animals (like chickens and rabbits) in kindergartens aim to help children understand the ethical implications of "food comes from life" through caring for

living beings. In practice, kindergartens organize children to participate in community farm labor, such as feeding animals and tending to plants, to help them perceive the fragility and interdependence of life [9]; or teachers use picture books, role-playing, and other game activities to help children understand the natural laws of life cycles, using gentler methods to avoid direct exposure to practices like slaughtering. Studies show that the American model effectively reduces ethical controversy risks through progressive experiences and psychological safety design (such as teacher-led reflective discussions and trauma-informed support), but its weak handling of the "life-to-food" transformation in the food chain has been criticized for avoiding responsibility ethics [10]. Although Japan's dietary education integrates cultural values, its reliance on systemic policy support may limit its direct applicability to China's curriculum focused on safety.

In China, life education for young children is often limited to safety education, such as traffic safety and drowning prevention. Teachers frequently use methods like scenario simulations, catchy rhymes, and picture books to raise children's awareness of safety. As a result, life education has been narrowed down to "risk avoidance skills training," lacking in-depth exploration of the essence of life, the meaning of death, and ecological ethics.

2.2 Research Status Related to Animal Feeding Activities

Research in our country has shown that young children already possess a rudimentary understanding of biology, which can serve as a foundation for life education. Children have an innate affinity with animals, laying an emotional groundwork for their knowledge of animal behavior. Young children possess informal, pre-scientific knowledge related to animals, known as the "rudimentary biological theory of preschool children." This theory posits that even without systematic life science education, children can explain the birth, growth, aging, illness, and death of plants and animals using biological causality based on their life experiences and physiological phenomena.[11]

In our country, with the continuous advancement of kindergarten curriculum reform, many kindergartens have incorporated animal care into children's participatory learning experiences.

Kindergarten animals mainly exist in two places: one is the classroom, where small animals such as fish, hamsters, and turtles are primarily kept, with teachers selecting the types based on activity content. For example, when introducing snails to children, they are encouraged to raise them personally in the classroom, fostering their initial scientific inquiry skills. The second place is a dedicated animal care area, which houses rabbits, turtles, and other small animals, as well as larger, more docile animals like sheep. [12] However, in practice, this often comes with issues such as teachers lacking professional training knowledge, insufficient equipment and space, and difficulties in management and maintenance. [13]

At the same time, life education in animal husbandry activities at domestic kindergartens has long faced ethical practice dilemmas, especially lacking systematic guidance on critical issues such as animals falling ill or dying. Existing research indicates that most kindergartens tend to avoid ethical conflicts: animal husbandry is often simplified into a tool for "observing life phenomena," and when animals become sick or die, teachers typically adopt strategies of "quick replacement" (such as quietly replacing with similar animals) or "avoiding discussion." [14]

In the United States, animal care activities in kindergartens are subject to clear regulations. To protect children's safety, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has a dedicated section on its official website titled "Animals in Schools and Daycare Centers," which guides teachers and daycare staff on better managing classroom pets. The center also collaborates with the National Association of Public Health Veterinarians to develop the "Guidelines for Preventing Animal-Source Diseases in Public Places," focusing on preventing and managing zoonotic diseases that may arise from keeping animals. Additionally, to promote high-quality early childhood education, state governments across the United States established early learning standards suitable for their respective states in the early 21st century. These standards cover various areas of child development. In the science domain, there is a specific subfield called "Biology," which includes standards and performance indicators related to animals under the "Science Knowledge" subfield. These standards outline the goals for animal learning at different age levels, covering the scientific

knowledge children should acquire about animals, methods for exploring animals, and positive emotional attitudes toward animals.[15] The U.S. government's advocated kindergarten animal education emphasizes "place-based education" (Place-based Education), which means designing curricula based on local ecological environments and cultural resources to help children build their understanding of life from familiar living spaces. The core idea is that children's cognitive development should be grounded in direct experience, and local animals, as concrete representations of the environment, can effectively bridge children's life experiences with scientific learning. Early Learning Standards in various states generally require teachers to prioritize the use of local animal resources: incorporating outdoor environments into classroom design; fostering exploration skills through observing and caring for local flora and fauna; expanding from observing nearby animals to investigating local ecological relationships; and using information technology to learn about animals in different regions, broadening horizons and providing diverse experiences. [3]

3. Study on the Educational Value of Animal Rearing Activities

3.1 Promote Cognitive Development

Animal rearing activities provide a unique practical field for children's cognitive development through physical experience and contextualized learning. Its value is not only reflected in the accumulation of scientific knowledge, but also in the systematic improvement of thinking mode and language ability.

3.1.1 Scientific thinking: from observation of phenomena to concept construction and reasoning

Based on Piaget's cognitive development theory, young children in the preoperational stage (ages 2-7) rely on concrete imagery thinking. Animal husbandry activities help them transition from describing observable life phenomena (such as growth, reproduction, and death) to logical reasoning, aiding in the construction of basic concepts in "life sciences." For example, in an observation project on "baby silkworms" at a kindergarten, middle-class children record the number of molts, changes in appetite, and behavioral patterns daily. Many children

independently discover the rule that "silkworms stop eating 24 hours before molting" within two weeks and hypothesize: "Silkworms need to conserve energy for molting." Through observing the silkworms' molting process, children move from describing physical changes to making causal hypotheses under the guidance of reflective questions posed by teachers. Such practices validate the effectiveness of the "learning by doing" theory-the combination of direct manipulation and reflective dialogue can accelerate the cognitive leap from "concrete experience" to "abstract concepts." [16]

3.1.2 Language development: from vocabulary accumulation to narrative expression

Animals, as concrete objects of observation, provide rich descriptive material for language expression. When observing young children's "animal observation diaries," we found that they can systematically describe the morphological characteristics of turtles in the classroom. The frequency of their use of adjectives and complex sentence structures is notably increased. Further research revealed that animal care activities promote language skills with a "scene-dependent" nature: when teachers combine observation records with narrative activities, children not only use scientific vocabulary accurately but also develop narrative logic through role-playing and story creation. It is worth noting that the leap in language skills requires a closed-loop design of "observation-recording-expression" to ensure effectiveness; mere exposure to animals without structured guidance has limited impact.

3.2 Cultivate Social Development

3.2.1 Conflict resolution and collaboration skills
Responsibility distribution in animal care often leads to conflicts among young children, which can serve as opportunities for social learning. For example, two groups of children argued over the "daily rabbit feeding rights." Instead of directly intervening, the teacher guided them to discuss the relationship between "rabbit health" and "fairness," ultimately leading to the creation of a clearly divided "Rabbit Care Rotation Chart." Since then, disputes over this issue have significantly decreased, and the children have proactively applied the "rotation rules" to other scenarios. Additionally, after mixed-age classes began rabbit-keeping activities, they collectively researched materials and consulted those with relevant experience to solve problems

encountered in rabbit care, thereby enhancing their cooperation and problem-solving skills. [17]
This case illustrates the core idea of Vygotsky's "Sociocultural Theory": social development is internalized through tools (such as rule sheets) and mediators (such as teacher guidance). Further research has found that when children participate in setting rules, their adherence to these rules is significantly higher than when they passively accept existing rules. This confirms the motivational role of "autonomy" in social behavior.

3.2.2 Cultural identity

Local animal husbandry activities can strengthen young children's cultural identity. Native animals, such as the peacock of the Dai people, the panda of Sichuan, and the spring silkworms of southern Jiangnan, are endowed with symbolic meanings in specific cultural contexts. The process of raising these animals transforms abstract culture into tangible life. For example, in rural kindergartens in Japan, children participate in raising "Akita dogs" (the national dog of Japan), learning about their cultural narrative as the prototype of "Loyal Dog Hachiko." By making traditional collars for Akita dogs and retelling stories of gratitude, children not only understand the biological characteristics of dogs but also internalize national virtues like "loyalty" and "perseverance" as part of their self-identity. Such practices combine animal husbandry with local culture and ecological ethics, both preserving traditional cultural genes and aligning with our call for "ecological civilization education."

3.2.3 Emotional education and sense of responsibility

Animal care activities, through sustained emotional investment, help foster empathy and a sense of responsibility in young children. In the daily interactions with small animals, children gradually develop an awareness and concern for life through feeding, petting, and observing. When they notice that a rabbit taps its front paws on the food bowl when hungry or that a parrot chirps urgently when lonely, they begin to interpret non-verbal signals and try to respond by adding more food or offering companionship. This intimate contact with animals promotes the formation of empathy in young children. Tasks such as cleaning the cage at fixed times and recording the health status of animals also instill a sense of responsibility in children through concrete actions. When they realize that their

negligence could lead to their small animal being hungry or sick, they develop an understanding of the role of "caretaker." Through interactions with small animals, children not only gain unique emotional experiences but also learn how to transform their concern into sustained action.

4. Ethical Controversy

4.1 Animal Welfare Issues

In animal husbandry activities at kindergartens, animal welfare is often overlooked. For example, during the breeding period of hamsters, a teacher repeatedly forcibly separated the pups from their mother to make the children "observe carefully." The mother hamster, driven by her instinct to protect her offspring, carried the pup away and hid it. However, the children mistook this for "the mother hamster playing with her baby," and the teacher even described the process as "fun." Such behavior essentially causes anxiety and stress in animal parent-child separation, but due to a lack of knowledge in animal behavior, the teacher misinterpreted the animal's fear as a display of "maternal love." [18] Teachers merely view animals as "teaching props" rather than living beings with emotions and survival needs. Despite some kindergartens attempting to bridge the knowledge gap through professional training, not all teachers will update their perspectives. The teacher first encountered the concept of "animal welfare" in post-service education, realizing that "observing insects in transparent bottles is an infringement on animal welfare." Consequently, she adjusted her teaching strategies. However, more teachers view such concepts merely as "additional requirements," failing to truly internalize them as educational ethics. [18] Animal welfare education should not be confined to conceptual instruction; it must involve practical training to guide teachers from "emotional awareness" to "rational action."

4.2 Death Education

Animal death is the most sensitive ethical challenge in life education. In China, accidental injuries to young children are the leading cause of death for children aged 1-4 years. This indicates that life cognition education in kindergartens is crucial. Educating young children about death can help them better understand and recognize life, avoid accidental injuries, and grow up healthily.

In kindergarten practice, death education often falls into cognitive pitfalls due to teachers' avoidance strategies. When a goldfish in the natural corner rolls over its belly, young children around the tank ask naive questions: "The goldfish is still not moving" or "It's still open-eyed." Some children even try to use "magic" to bring the goldfish back to life. Faced with such scenarios, teachers often choose to conceal or beautify death—telling the children that "the little goldfish is just sleeping" or "it has returned to the goldfish planet." [19] This romanticized explanation, while alleviating immediate emotional shock, leads to a cognitive bias in children regarding the end of life. If teachers continue to avoid the real situation, children cannot fully understand the life cycle and may develop a serious disregard for life. The core of death education is not to impart heavy concepts but to guide children through real-life situations to naturally perceive that "life has a beginning and an end," thus learning to cherish the present and respect life. Only by responding to children's questions in a gentle and honest manner can we help them establish a healthy view of life and death.

4.3 Management and Responsibility Issues

The management loopholes in animal husbandry activities at kindergartens have significantly increased ethical and practical risks. Most teachers lack basic knowledge of veterinary medicine and cannot accurately identify disease symptoms, leading to animals dying due to delayed treatment; some teachers even mistakenly interpret abnormal animal behavior as "lively and active," overlooking the psychological stress behind it. Additionally, animal husbandry comes with hygiene risks, such as avian influenza and parasite transmission, which force kindergartens to halt these activities midway. All of this is due to improper management and a lack of relevant knowledge among teachers.

The more complex conflict lies in the disputes arising from ambiguous responsibilities. When animals fall ill or die unexpectedly, the zoo, parents, and external organizations often find themselves in a blame game: whether to cover medical expenses, whether to compensate parents, and whether to accept supervision from animal protection groups—these issues lack clear institutional guidelines. For example, after a hamster died due to a child accidentally

ingesting toxic bedding, parents accused teachers of negligence, while the zoo refused responsibility citing it as an "accident." Such controversies highlight the lax management system. Animal care is neither included in systematic conservation protocols nor managed through inter-departmental collaboration, leaving educational intentions trapped in a dual ethical and legal dilemma.

5. Conclusion

This study analyzes the practice of life education in animal husbandry activities at kindergartens, which can help children learn scientific knowledge, develop cooperative skills, and learn to care for life. However, there are many issues in practice: teachers sometimes overlook animal welfare, death education is avoided, and insufficient professional competence of teachers leads to increased management risks. These problems reflect the deep conflict between educational goals and the dignity of life, as well as the limitations of instrumental thinking in current curriculum design.

To improve these activities, it is recommended: First, kindergartens should implement a welfare checklist to ensure that cages meet minimum size standards (for example, the cage area for hamsters should be 0.5 square meters), and that food is nutritionally balanced, with monthly inspections for verification; Second, guide children to understand death in a realistic way, such as discussing "life will end" when a goldfish dies, rather than fabricating reasons; Third, enhance the collaboration between home, school, and community, for instance, by introducing professional forces like veterinarians and animal protection organizations, establishing an "animal guardianship team," and clarifying responsibilities and dispute resolution procedures. Additionally, the concept of "localism" in American education can be referenced, integrating local animals with cultural symbols (such as the peacock of the Dai ethnic group and spring silkworms in southern China) to deepen cultural identity and ecological ethics in life education. Only by treating animals as equal subjects of life can we achieve a qualitative transformation in life education from "knowledge transmission" to "ethical internalization."

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