

Experiential Learning-Oriented Reform of Art Education for Preschool Children: Focusing on the Core Competencies of Pre- Service Teachers

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Abstract: The course "Art Education for Preschool Children" is integral to preschool education, essential for developing the comprehensive skills of future educators. However, current teaching models often reveal gaps between theory and practice, limited student engagement, and inadequate development of core competencies. This study introduces a curriculum reform framework grounded in John Dewey's "learning by doing" and David Kolb's experiential learning cycle theories to address these issues. The framework aims to enhance pre-service teachers' artistic literacy, practical teaching skills, reflective abilities, and innovation. It comprises a tripartite experiential learning system: "art form experience—children's artistic behavior experience—art education process experience." A progressive teaching model, emphasizing "learning by doing, reflecting while learning, and innovating through reflection," is implemented via diverse methods, including scenario simulations, field observations, and reflective journals. Moreover, a reformed, multifaceted evaluation system prioritizes process-oriented assessment to comprehensively and dynamically assess students' learning outcomes and competency growth. The findings demonstrate that this reform initiative effectively bolsters students' learning initiative, facilitates the translation of theoretical knowledge into practical skills, and significantly enhances pre-service teachers' core competencies. This study not only delineates a systematic reform trajectory for the "Art Education for Preschool Children" course but also furnishes valuable insights for pedagogical innovation in other practice-oriented teacher education programs.

Keywords: Experiential Learning; Preschool Art Education; Curriculum Reform; Pre-Service Teachers; Core Competencies

1. Introduction

The development of high-quality and professional preschool teaching staff has become a strategic priority in China's educational advancement, driven by increasing societal demands for preschool education quality. The Ministry of Education of China has explicitly stated the need to "enhance the professional competence of kindergarten teachers"[1]. As the primary training ground for preschool educators, normal universities bear the responsibility of cultivating qualified and even outstanding preschool teachers for society. In this context, the reform of the curriculum system and teaching models in preschool education programs has become particularly urgent.

"Art Education for Preschool Children", a core course in preschool education, aims to deepen students' understanding of art education, equip them with the skills to guide children's artistic activities, and enhance their artistic sensibility, expressiveness, and creativity. This course serves not only as a conduit for knowledge but also as a critical platform for developing pre-service teachers' professional competencies, particularly in artistic literacy and educational practice. However, current teaching practices often fall short. Many institutions still rely on a traditional, teacher-centered, theory-heavy model, where students passively absorb information with limited interaction and practical experience. Although they can recite art education theories, they struggle to design age-appropriate, developmentally meaningful activities. Students might list techniques for drawing and crafts but lack a deep understanding of artistic aesthetics and emotional experiences

[2]. This gap between "knowing" and "doing" significantly impedes the effective development of pre-service teachers' core competencies.

Experiential learning theory posits that learners construct knowledge, develop skills, and shape attitudes through direct participation and practice [3]. This "learning by doing" approach aligns closely with the practical and affective nature of art education, offering a theoretical framework and practical strategies to address current teaching challenges in the "Art Education for Preschool Children" course. Consequently, this study explores curriculum reform guided by experiential learning, with significant theoretical and practical implications: (1) This study systematically applies experiential learning theory to the curriculum reform of "Art Education for Preschool Children." It constructs a "triple experience" content system and a "doing-thinking-creating" teaching model, thereby deepening and concretizing experiential learning theory within this specific curricular domain. Additionally, this work enriches the theoretical framework for pre-service teacher training, providing a new perspective and analytical lens for exploring teaching reforms in higher education oriented toward core competencies; (2) The study aims to address practical issues in current curriculum instruction by designing concrete and actionable reform plans and implementation pathways, directly serving teaching practice. The research findings are expected to significantly enhance the instructional quality of the "Art Education for Preschool Children" course, facilitating students' internalization of theoretical knowledge into practical wisdom and comprehensively improving their four-dimensional core competencies as future preschool teachers: artistic literacy, educational practice ability, reflective capacity, and innovative ability. The successful experience of this reform can serve as a model and reference for innovation in other practice-oriented teacher education courses, thereby promoting the transformation and upgrading of talent cultivation models in preschool education and higher teacher education more broadly.

2. Literature Review: Theoretical Foundations

2.1 Theoretical Foundations of Experiential Learning

Experiential learning, with roots in the work of John Dewey and David A. Kolb, critiques the traditional divide between theory and practice. In "Democracy and Education" Dewey introduced the principle of "Learning by Doing" [4], asserting that true learning arises from engaging with real-world problems. He highlighted the importance of the continuity and interaction of experiences in the learning process.

Kolb systematically proposed the Experiential Learning Cycle model in 1984 [5], building upon previous research. This model consists of four cyclical stages: (1) Concrete Experience (CE): Learners are fully immersed in immediate, hands-on practical activities. (2) Reflective Observation (RO): The learner reviews and reflects on the experience from different perspectives. (3) Abstract Conceptualization (AC): Learners refine and generalize concrete experiences into universal theories, models, or concepts through reflection. (4) Active Experimentation (AE): Learners apply newly formed concepts to novel situations to solve problems or conduct further exploration, thereby initiating a new cycle of experience.

Kolb's experiential learning cycle served as the theoretical framework for structuring the teaching loop in this study, which emphasizes "learning by doing, reflecting while learning, and creating through reflection." This approach underscores the comprehensive learning process from practice to reflection, followed by theoretical construction and renewed practice.

2.2 Research on Pre-service Teachers' Core Competencies

Core competencies for pre-service teachers encompass the essential qualities and key abilities they must develop to meet the demands of lifelong personal growth and societal development as future educators [5]. Existing research generally agrees that core competencies should include solid subject knowledge, advanced educational concepts, outstanding teaching practice abilities, continuous self-reflection skills, and an innovative spirit [6-10]. Aligned with the characteristics of the "Art Education for Preschool Children" curriculum, this study specifies the core competencies of pre-service teachers in four dimensions: (1) artistic literacy, encompassing aesthetic perception and artistic expression; (2) educational practice ability, including the capacity to design, organize, and evaluate art activities; (3)

reflective ability, involving the critical analysis of personal experiences and educational practices; and (4) innovative ability, referring to the capacity to innovate in the content and methods of art education.

2.3 Preschool Art Education and Curriculum Reform

Preschool art education theory underscores the multifaceted value of art instruction, encompassing not merely skill attainment, but also the preservation and stimulation of children's imagination, creativity, emotional expression, and aesthetic development. Viktor Lowenfeld's research has illuminated the stage-specific characteristics of children's drawing evolution, emphasizing the importance for educators to respect, rather than impose adult standards upon, children's spontaneous artistic expression [11]. This approach necessitates that pre-service teachers first cultivate an understanding of children's perspectives and immerse themselves in their artistic realm.

Efforts to reform the "Art Education for Preschool Children" curriculum have begun, with some researchers implementing methods like project-based learning and workshop models, yielding some results [12]. However, most reforms are fragmented, focusing on methodological tweaks without a systematic, overarching design aimed at developing students' core competencies. Notably, few studies have thoroughly adapted experiential learning theory to create a cohesive teaching system that integrates the entire curriculum and aligns with various aspects of pre-service teachers' core competencies. This study aims to address this gap.

3. Problem Analysis: Limitations of Traditional Teaching Models

The traditional teaching model of the "Art Education for Preschool Children" course warrants a comprehensive examination to identify the inherent shortcomings that necessitate curricular reform. A rigorous analysis of the underlying issues serves as the practical foundation and imperative for enacting meaningful changes.

3.1 Rigid Teaching Model: Dominated by the "Lecture-Reception" Approach

The traditional classroom model in art education often features a unidirectional approach, where

teachers systematically expound upon theories, disciplinary knowledge, and pedagogical methodologies, while students passively absorb the information. This format can result in a dull classroom atmosphere and diminished student engagement, as the inherently dynamic, emotive, and creative nature of art education is reduced to the rote memorization of discrete knowledge points, thereby deviating from its fundamental essence [13].

3.2 Lack of Learning Experience: Neglect of Student Subjectivity

The essence of art education lies in experiential engagement. However, in traditional classroom settings, students often lack opportunities for direct participation in artistic creation, such as painting, handicrafts, music, and dance, or to experience the artistic process from the perspective of a young learner. Consequently, their understanding of art remains predominantly theoretical, focused on knowledge "about" art rather than learning "through" art. This lack of experiential engagement leads to a superficial and shallow comprehension of art, hindering the development of profound emotional connections and aesthetic perceptions. As a result, students' artistic literacy struggles to improve.

3.3 Disconnection between Theory and Practice: Challenges in Translating Knowledge into Competence

In teacher education courses, particularly "Art Education for Preschool Children," a recurring issue arises. Students study Viktor Lowenfeld's stages of artistic development, but during simulations or internships, they often assess children's artwork by adult criteria, like realism. Although they learn various methods for organizing art activities, they become overwhelmed when engaging with actual preschoolers. This stems from a gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application, depriving students of the chance to convert theory into adaptable practical wisdom through iterative cycles of trial, error, reflection, and adjustment [14].

3.4 Inadequate Cultivation of Core Competencies: Separation of Objectives and Processes

The traditional teaching approach often narrows the curriculum to the mastery of discrete knowledge points, neglecting the systematic

cultivation of students' core competencies. This shortcoming manifests in several key areas: (1) Artistic Literacy: Lacking firsthand experience, students' artistic perception and expressive abilities remain stagnant. (2) Educational Practice Skills: Disconnected from real or simulated teaching contexts, students' abilities in activity design and organization become mere theoretical exercises. (3) Reflective Capacity: Under a one-way instruction model, students lack tangible "experiences" to reflect upon and are not guided to develop reflective habits. (4) Innovation Capability: When learning is oriented toward memorization and replication, students' critical thinking and innovative spirit are stifled. Traditional course evaluations often depend on final exams or skill assessments.

Written exams mainly assess students' memorization of theory, whereas skill assessments focus on technical proficiency and task completion. These summative, standardized methods inadequately capture students' growth and transformation, neglecting their progress in practice, reflection, and innovation. The lack of formative evaluation further undermines its vital roles in facilitating learning, diagnosing issues, and guiding development.

4. Reform Proposal: Experiential Learning-Oriented Curriculum Design

To address the issues outlined, this study proposes a curriculum reform plan for "Art Education for Preschool Children" that positions experiential learning as its core principle and seeks to develop pre-service teachers' key competencies as its primary objective. The proposed curriculum reform emphasizes hands-on, immersive learning experiences to foster pre-service teachers' pedagogical skills and their ability to effectively implement art-based education for young children. This approach aims to equip pre-service teachers with the necessary knowledge, attitudes, and practical expertise to deliver high-quality art instruction that nurtures the holistic development of preschool students.

4.1 Guiding Ideology and Core Connotation of the Reform

The proposed reform initiative aims to restructure the learning process into an integrated whole, emphasizing active student engagement, practical experience, critical reflection, and innovative application. The

concept of experiential learning extends beyond merely incorporating additional activities; rather, it entails a structured, guided process of transforming experiences to foster cognitive and skill development in learners. The ultimate goal is to facilitate the integration of knowledge, skills, emotions, and values, thereby comprehensively promoting the formation of pre-service teachers' core competencies.

4.2 Restructuring Curriculum Objectives: Aligning with Four-Dimensional Core Competencies

The reformed curriculum objectives will shift from a singular focus on knowledge acquisition to an integrated competency-based approach, as outlined Table 1 below:

Table 1. Reconstruction of Curriculum Objectives Aligned with Core Competencies
Core Competency Dimension

Core Competency Dimension	Course Objective Description
Artistic Literacy	Through hands-on engagement in diverse artistic forms, enhance aesthetic perception, artistic expressiveness, and cultural understanding, cultivating a positive artistic disposition.
Educational Practice Ability	Master methods for observing and interpreting children's artistic behaviors; design, implement, and evaluate developmentally appropriate art education activities based on child development principles and pedagogical objectives.
Reflective Ability	Develop capacity for critical analysis and synthesis of personal and peer artistic experiences and educational practices, establishing self-awareness and habitual actions for continuous improvement.
Innovative Ability	Cultivate awareness and capability to explore innovations in art education content, materials, methodologies, and assessment; design creative and personalized instructional plans.

4.3 Restructuring Teaching Content: Constructing a "Triple Experience" System

To achieve the stated objectives, we restructured the course content from a traditional chapter-based knowledge framework into a modular system centered on "experience." This framework, termed the "Triple Experience," is

designed to guide students in a multidimensional exploration of the essence of art education.

4.3.1 The first dimension: experiencing artistic forms (self-experience)

This reform initiates a shift from passive learning to active participation in the arts. Students transition from mere listeners in painting, crafts, or music classes to active "learners" and "creators." For example, during a color theory unit, students produce abstract paintings to illustrate the contrast between warm and cool tones. In music, they use bodily movement to interpret and express various rhythmic patterns. This experiential approach seeks to dispel the "mystery" or "intimidation" often associated with art, awaken latent artistic potential, and establish a foundation for artistic literacy [15].

4.3.2 The second dimension: perspective-taking in children's artistic behaviors

After acquiring preliminary experiences in artistic self-expression, students must shift their perspective to understand how children engage in artistic activities. This can be achieved through several approaches: 1) Situational Simulation, where students draw with their non-dominant hand or use oversized brushes to simulate the underdeveloped fine motor control of young children; 2) Case Analysis, involving the observation of recorded videos of children's artistic activities to analyze their behaviors, language, and artworks, thereby interpreting their developmental needs and psychological states; and 3) Field Observation, where students visit partner kindergartens to unobtrusively observe and document children's autonomous activities in art zones. The core objective of this dimension is to cultivate students' empathy and their ability to observe and interpret children's artistic behaviors from a child-centered perspective.

4.3.3 The third dimension: experiencing the art education process (Role-Playing Experience)

This stage represents the pinnacle of experiential learning, where students assume the role of "teacher." Here, students engage in comprehensive teaching practice building upon the previous two dimensions of experience. The primary components include: 1) Micro-teaching: Students work collaboratively to design and deliver a 15-20 minute mini art activity for their peers, followed by collective feedback from both instructors and classmates. 2) Instructional Design: Participants develop a complete art activity plan,

encompassing objectives, preparation, procedures, extensions, and evaluation. 3) Reflective Practice: Students organize and implement an actual art activity during internships or practicums, and subsequently compose a detailed post-activity reflection report. This culminating experience aims to seamlessly integrate students' theoretical knowledge with practical skills, serving as a core training ground for educational practice, reflective thinking, and innovative capabilities.

4.3.4 Constructing the teaching model: "Learning by Doing, Thinking by Learning, Creating by Thinking"

In alignment with Kolb's learning cycle, we have developed a progressive teaching model that complements the "triple experience" content system. This model emphasizes "learning by doing, thinking while learning, and creating through thinking."

Learning by Doing: Corresponding to Kolb's "concrete experience," students acquire rich, firsthand perceptual experiences through "triple experience" activities. This serves as the starting point for all learning.

Reflective Learning: Aligning with Kolb's "reflective observation" and "abstract conceptualization," educators must facilitate effective reflective activities following each learning experience. These may include group discussions, reflective journals, and experience-sharing sessions. Guiding students to reflect on questions such as "What did I experience?," "Why did I have this experience?," "How does this relate to the theoretical concepts?," and "How would I respond as the teacher?" allows them to systematize and theorize their fragmented experiences. Through this in-depth reflection, learners can develop a more comprehensive understanding and integrate theory with practice.

Creating from Reflection: Aligned with Kolb's "active experimentation," this phase prompts students to engage in innovative practices grounded in reflection and theoretical synthesis. For example, students might reconsider the constraints of conventional materials and subsequently experiment with artistic creation using unstructured materials like natural objects or discarded items. Likewise, after evaluating current teaching models, they might develop a novel gamified art activity plan. This approach completes a learning cycle and enhances the educational process.

4.4 Reform of the Evaluation System: Implementation of Diversified Process-Oriented Assessment

To align with the new pedagogical framework, the assessment system must transition from a singular summative evaluation to a multifaceted,

dynamic process-oriented approach. The evaluation modalities must expand beyond exclusive teacher assessment to incorporate student self-assessment and peer assessment. For the specific assessment framework, see the Table 2.

Table 2. Revised Assessment Criteria

Assessment Dimension	Assessment Tool/Method	Content & Objectives	Weight
Formative Assessment	Artwork Portfolio	Document growth trajectory in "Artistic Form Experience", evaluating artistic expressiveness and aesthetic development	30%
	Reflective Journals/Observation Reports	Assess depth of reflection and ability to integrate theory with practice during "Children's Artistic Behavior Experience" and "Educational Process Experience"	30%
	Group Collaboration & Class Participation	Evaluate teamwork, communication skills, and learning initiative	10%
Summative Assessment	Teaching Plan Design & Simulated Teaching	Comprehensively assess educational practice capabilities and innovation skills demonstrated during "Art Education Process Experience"	30%
Total Weight:			100%

5. Implementation Pathway: Specific Strategies and Methods

An excellent reform plan requires a clear implementation pathway to ensure its effective integration into teaching practice.

5.1 Design of Teaching Procedures

The reformed curriculum will be structured around three key phases: "pre-class preparation, in-class implementation, and post-class extension."

Pre-class Preparation: Students arrive equipped for class. The instructor provides theoretical readings (e.g., chapters from Dewey and Kolb), case videos, or observation tasks linked to the week's experiential theme beforehand. Students must complete these readings and bring initial reflections to class.

In-class Implementation: The classroom is the primary setting for experience, interaction, and reflection. A 90-minute session can be structured as follows: 1) Introduction and Warm-up (10 minutes): Engage students with games or brief discussions. 2) Core Experiential Activity (30-40 minutes): Implement activities from the "Triple Experience" framework. 3) Group Reflection and Sharing (20 minutes): Facilitate group discussions for students to exchange experiential insights. 4) Teacher Guidance and Theoretical Elevation (15 minutes): Provide feedback,

connecting student experiences to educational theories, transitioning from concrete to abstract understanding. 5) Assignment of Tasks (5 minutes): Assign tasks for completion outside of class.

Post-class Extension: Learning extends beyond the classroom. Students engage in reflective journaling, organize their art portfolios, or prepare for upcoming simulated teaching sessions. These activities are crucial for "learning through reflection" and "creating through reflection."

5.2 Application of Specific Teaching Methods

To support experiential teaching, it is necessary to comprehensively utilize various teaching methods:

(1) **Scenario Simulation Method:** Create classroom scenarios that closely resemble real-life kindergarten art activities, allowing students to role-play as teachers or children and engage in interactive experiences.

(2) **Role-Playing Method:** Students assume roles such as supportive teachers, interventionist teachers, and laissez-faire teachers to explore the effects of diverse educational behaviors on "young children," portrayed by classmates.

(3) **Field Observation Method:** Forge partnerships with nearby high-quality kindergartens, enabling students to conduct regular on-site observations. Students will gather

firsthand data using professional observation recording tools, such as time and event sampling.

(4) Case-Based Teaching Method: Utilize exemplary children's artwork or videos of artistic activities as case studies to facilitate in-depth analysis and discussion of the associated educational opportunities and challenges.

(5) Reflective Journal Method: Students must create a learning portfolio centered on reflective journals. These journals should capture not only "what was done" but also "what was thought," "what was learned," and "plans for future improvement."

(6) Workshop: Intensive hands-on workshops focusing on specific artistic skills (e.g., ceramics, printmaking) or pedagogical themes (e.g., "How to Utilize Recycled Materials") [14].

5.3 Transformation of Teacher-Student Roles and Allocation of Teaching Resources

The role of teachers has undergone a profound transformation. They are no longer solely the authoritative transmitters of knowledge, but have assumed the multifaceted responsibilities of designers, facilitators, promoters, and resource providers within the learning process. Their primary duties now encompass creating immersive experiential contexts, posing intellectually stimulating questions, orchestrating effective reflective discussions, and offering timely feedback and support to guide students' learning trajectories.

The transformation of the student role is characterized by a shift from passive knowledge reception to active knowledge construction, application, and exploration. Students must assume responsibility for their learning, actively engage in the process, boldly experiment, willingly share their insights, and diligently reflect on their experiences.

The allocation of teaching resources is critical for the implementation of experiential learning. Schools must provide well-equipped facilities, such as art studios, craft workshops, and dance studios, as well as a diverse array of art materials, including low-structured options, to facilitate hands-on learning. Establishing stable partnerships with local kindergartens to offer students practical training opportunities is also a crucial factor in the success of this educational reform.

6. Reflection on Effectiveness: Reform Outcomes and Lessons Learned

The present study reports on the preliminary implementation and evaluation of a reform initiative over the course of one academic semester. Analysis of student learning portfolios, questionnaires, feedback from discussion sessions, and interviews with cooperating kindergarten mentors provided initial insights into the program's effectiveness.

6.1 Positive Performance of Students' Learning Outcomes and Core Competency Development

Learning initiative and participation markedly improve in experiential classrooms compared to traditional ones. Students are more engaged, creating a more dynamic classroom environment. They frequently report that these classes are "more interesting," that "time passes quickly," and that they "truly learn something."

Through personal creation, students who initially believed they lacked artistic talent have produced works that satisfy them and build their artistic confidence. Their portfolios demonstrate a progression from imitation to expression, evolving from raw to skilled artistry.

The implementation of simulation-based teaching and practice enables students to design activity plans that prioritize a child-centered approach. This, in turn, leads to the formulation of clearer objectives, more structured content delivery, and enhanced teacher-child interactions. Feedback from cooperating kindergarten teachers suggests that reformed class interns demonstrate a rapid adaptability and improved understanding of observing and responding to children's needs.

Students' reflection logs demonstrate a high level of quality, showcasing their ability to deeply analyze both their own practices and those of others in conjunction with theoretical frameworks. In designing teaching schemes, various innovative ideas have surfaced, such as employing light and shadow in art games and integrating picture books into drama performances.

6.2 Simultaneous Upgrading of Teachers' Teaching Ability

The adoption of experiential teaching approaches heightens the demands placed on educators, thereby catalyzing their professional growth. Instructors must continually expand their pedagogical knowledge, devise more intricate learning activities, and enhance their

capacity to facilitate reflective discourse and in-situ feedback. This process inherently embodies a reciprocal "teaching and learning" dynamic.

6.3 Existing Problems and Continuous Improvement Direction

The educational reform has yielded initial progress, yet it continues to face several key challenges. Firstly, the student population exhibits substantial individual differences in artistic aptitude, personality, and reflective capacity, necessitating the design of more tailored support schemes. Secondly, while the process-oriented evaluation approach is scientifically sound, it imposes a heightened burden on teachers. The balance between subjective and objective assessment criteria, as well as the optimization of technological support tools, remains an area requiring further refinement. Thirdly, experiential teaching demands significant resources and time, requiring teachers to possess a high level of curricular integration expertise. Moving forward, the establishment of a comprehensive learning portfolio system, the incorporation of peer-mentoring mechanisms, and the development of more nuanced evaluation metrics will be crucial to enhancing teaching efficiency and equity.

7. Conclusions

This study introduces the "triple experience" system and the "doing-thinking-creating" teaching model to address deficiencies in core literacy training for pre-service teachers in preschool art education. Key contributions include: integrating Dewey and Kolb theories to create a locally adapted teaching framework; systematically reforming curriculum objectives, content, and evaluation with significant demonstration value; and preliminarily validating the model's effectiveness in enhancing students' initiative and cooperative development. Future research should focus on longitudinal studies, expanding the reform model to other practical courses, and exploring AI and VR technologies for cost-effective, high-simulation experiences. Overall, constructing this curriculum as a multi-platform that integrates experience, reflection, and innovation is crucial for cultivating excellent preschool teachers.

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