EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING AS A FOUNDATION FOR HOLISTIC DEVLOPMENT AT THE ECCE STAGE

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ABSTRACT

Early childhood is considered one of the most crucial stages of human life, as nearly 80% of brain development is completed by the age of three years and approximately 90% by the age of five. A substantial portion of this development takes place during the first two years of life, making this period highly sensitive and formative. Research further suggests that individuals tend to retain nearly 75% of what they actively do, in contrast to only 5% of what they hear and about 10% of what they read.

In this context, experiential learning at the early childhood stage plays a significant role in facilitating concrete understanding of various concepts. It enables children to learn naturally and effectively at their own pace without external pressure. Learning through direct experiences encourages children to think independently and engage actively with their surroundings. Through experiential learning, children develop a strong sense of achievement and enhanced self-confidence, which further strengthens the parent–child as well as teacher–student relationships.

Moreover, experiential learning contributes significantly to social development, skill enhancement, and the growth of imagination and creativity among young learners. It takes place through a variety of activities such as outdoor play, imaginative and creative expression through art, music, and dance, as well as exploration of nature and the surrounding environment.

This paper attempts to highlight ways of providing meaningful and fruitful learning experiences to young children. It also emphasizes strategies to make experiential learning more effective and efficient, along with suggesting innovative approaches for ensuring the harmonious and balanced development of the child.

Keywords: Experiential Learning, Holistic Development, Early childhood

INTRODUCTION

"Give the pupil something to do, not something to learn; and the doing is of such a nature as to determine thinking, abstract learning naturally results."

— John Dewey

Experiential learning refers to the process of acquiring knowledge through direct experience or "learning by doing." It encourages learners to engage in firsthand interaction with learning materials instead of relying solely on passive or theoretical instruction. This approach promotes active involvement, which leads to increased engagement, reduced distraction, and deeper understanding. It also allows learners to take ownership of their learning experiences, thereby making the learning process more meaningful and effective. Experiential learning has been strongly emphasized in National Education Policy 2020, which advocates activity-based, discovery-oriented, and learner-centered approaches in early childhood education.

The early childhood stage is particularly significant, as it is marked by rapid brain development. Approximately 80% of brain development occurs by the age of three, and nearly 90% by the age of five. Experiential learning at this stage introduces elements of observation, creativity, and active interaction into the early years of education. Since individuals retain a larger proportion of what they do compared to what they

hear or read, experiential learning becomes highly effective across all levels of education, including early childhood, elementary, secondary, and higher education.

Experiential learning fosters a deeper understanding of concepts because learners acquire knowledge through firsthand experiences rather than depending on the experiences of others, as is often the case in traditional learning methods. At the early childhood stage, this approach enables children to learn naturally and according to their own pace and interests.

Such learning occurs through activities like outdoor play, creative expression through art, music and dance, and exploration of nature and the surrounding environment. Learning through experiences encourage children to think independently and critically. It also helps them develop a sense of achievement and improved confidence, which further strengthens the bond between parents and children as well as teachers and learners. Experiential learning involves consolidation of ideas and skills through feedback, reflection and the application of the ideas and skills to new situations. Experiential learning is a process that develops knowledge, skills and attitudes based on consciously thinking about an experience. Thus, it involves direct and active personal experience combined with reflection and feedback. (UNESCO, 2010)).

NEP 2020 AND EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

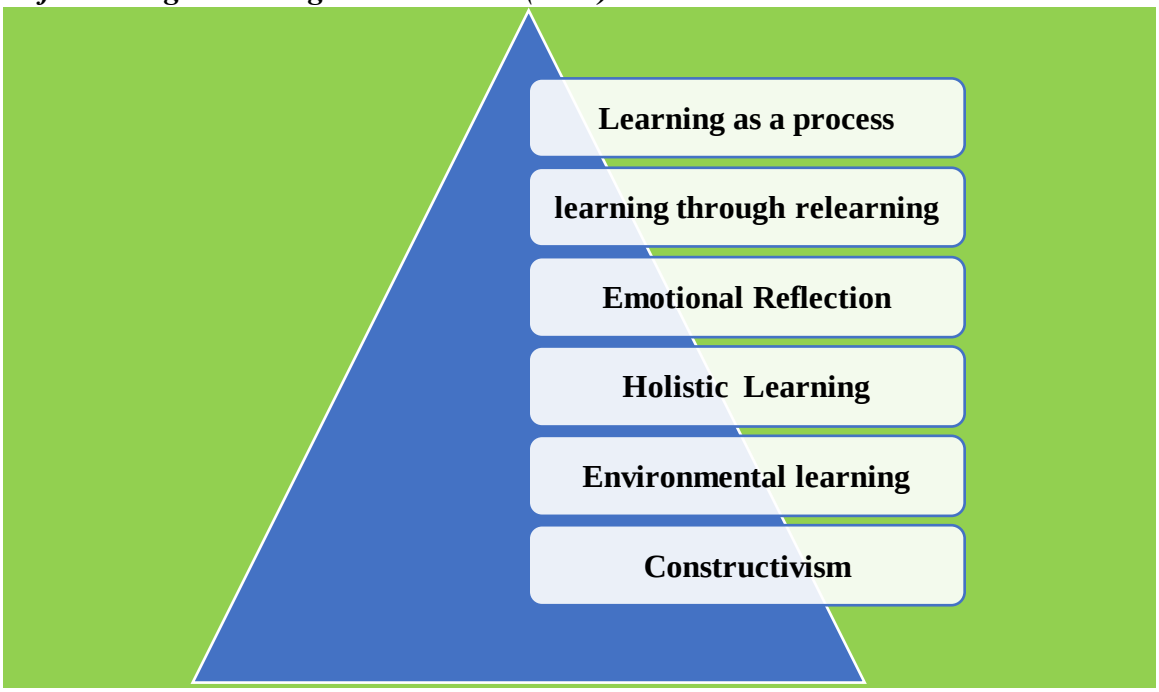
NEP 2020 also recommends that experiential learning will be adopted in all the stages of learning across all syllabi, including hands-on learning approach as well as sports integrated and arts integrated education. Classroom sessions will regularly contain more fun, creative collaborative and exploratory activities for deeper and more experiential learning. Experiential learning within each subject, and explorations of relations among different subjects, will be encouraged and emphasized despite the introduction of more specialized subjects and subject teachers. (NEP 2020, para 4.2)

SIX PRINCIPLES OF LEARNING ACCORDING TO DAVID KOLB

1. Learning as a Process
2. Learning through Relearning
3. Emotional Reflection
4. Holistic Learning
5. Environmental Learning
6. Constructivism

Figure 1

Six Principles of Learning According to David Kolb (1984)



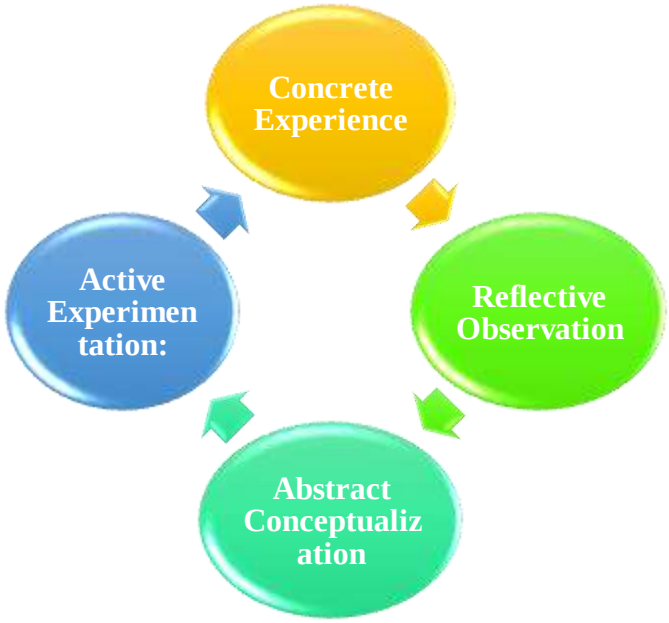
Learning as a Process: According to David Kolb, learning is a continuous and ongoing process that is grounded in experience. Knowledge is constantly derived from and tested through experiences. It is not a finite process but an ongoing journey in which learners continuously gain and apply new experiences in different contexts.

Learning through Relearning: Kolb emphasizes that learners' ideas should be expressed, discussed, and redefined. This process helps in refining understanding and improving the quality of learning. Through relearning, knowledge is consolidated and strengthened.
Emotional Reflection: Learning involves resolving conflicts between different modes of adaptation to the real world. It requires balancing reflection with action, as well as integrating feelings with thinking. This emotional and cognitive engagement enhances the learning process.
Holistic Learning: Learning affects the entire individual, including how they think, feel, perceive, and behave. It is a comprehensive process in which educators aim to develop all aspects of a learner's personality.
Environmental Learning: Learning occurs through interaction between the learner and the environment. Different learners may perceive the same experience differently based on their prior knowledge and understanding.
Constructivism: According to Kolb, knowledge is continuously constructed and reconstructed through experience. This constructivist approach plays a vital role in classroom learning and promotes active engagement

DAVID KOLB'S THEORY ON EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

Figure 2

Experiential Learning Cycle According to David Kolb (1984)



EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING CYCLE ACCORDING TO DAVID KOLB

1. **Concrete Experience:** This stage involves engaging in an activity or attempting something new, regardless of success or failure. It focuses on gaining tangible and direct experiences. At the early childhood stage, concrete experiences are particularly effective, as children find it easier to understand and grasp things that are physical and observable.
2. **Reflective Observation:** In this stage, learners reflect upon their experiences. Children organize and store their observations and experiences in memory for future use. Reflection helps in making sense of what has been experienced.
3. **Abstract Conceptualization:** At this stage, learners analyze and interpret their experiences logically. Children begin to think critically and may add their own ideas or interpretations to the knowledge they have gained.
4. **Active Experimentation:** This stage involves applying the newly acquired knowledge or concepts in practical situations. Children test their understanding by experimenting with their experiences in real-life contexts.

Example – Learning to Recite a Rhyme:

- Concrete Experience: The child listens to a rhyme recited by someone.
- Reflective Observation: The child observes how others recite and internalizes the rhythm and tone.

- Abstract Conceptualization: The child understands elements such as pauses, modulation, and intonation.
- Active Experimentation: The child attempts to recite the rhyme independently.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Eschenbach and Raqsdale (1989) supported the connection that the children learn better by doing. Children are more focused on their learning, achieve a deeper insight or meaning of the concepts and they are able to apply the information. **Powell and Well (2002**) concluded that the experiential model is very effective in environmental education. **Sugarman (1985)** found that the experiential learning framework helps students develop their learning skills through conceptualization of the total learning process. **Umapathy (1985)** found that experiential exercise has recognized to be effective in generating significant student involvement and participation in the learning process, with increased student ability to preserve knowledge for a longer period of time. **Gopinah and Sawyer (1999)** found that the recursive nature of experiential learning promotes strategic decision making and group behavior consistent with long-term strategy. **Domesk (2007**) illustrated effectively connects the academics with the practice, posters and effective interdisciplinary curriculum, link students to work experience and job opportunities. **Kolb and Kolb (2010)** suggest that play in a ludic learning space can promote deep learning in the intellectual, physical, spiritual and moral realms. **Biswal. (2015)** discussed that learner centered approach should be adopted to keep the learning happily. **Zeng, et.al (2017)** found the positive effects of physical activity on both motor skills and cognitive development in preschool children.**Saha, Sabnur, Kumar , Sahi, Lata & Lal,(2026)** explored how experiential learning enhanced understanding, creativity, and real-world problem-solving.

OBJECTIVE OF THE PRESENT STUDY

To study the role of experiential learning practices at ECCE stage for comprehensive child development.

IMPORTANCE EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING AT EARLY CHILDHOOD STAGE

Experiential learning emphasizes the process of acquiring knowledge through direct engagement and active participation. It enables children to gain firsthand experiences rather than relying solely on theoretical instruction. The process of experiential learning generally involves four stages: experiencing, observing, analysing, and experimenting.

This approach can be effectively implemented both within and beyond the classroom setting. Activities designed for experiential learning need not be complex; rather, they should be simple, meaningful, and aligned with the developmental level of the child. The focus should be on ensuring that children actively participate and derive their own understanding through experience.

For instance, instead of merely teaching the concept of plant growth through textbooks, children can be encouraged to plant seeds and observe their growth over time. Such activities provide concrete learning experiences that are more impactful and long-lasting.

EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING ACTIVITIES AT EARLY CHILDHOOD STAGE

According to National Education Policy 2020, Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) should focus on play-based, activity-based, and experiential learning to ensure holistic development of children.

Daily art and craft activities play a significant role in fostering imagination and creativity among children. Through drawing, colouring, cutting, and pasting, children are able to express their ideas and emotions freely while simultaneously enhancing fine motor skills.

Figure 3
Daily art and craft activities

Source : https://www.gettyimages.com.au/photos/early-childhood-education-classroom

Gardening activities, such as planting seeds and nurturing plants, provide children with firsthand experience of natural processes. These activities help them understand fundamental concepts related to growth, development, and environmental awareness, while also instilling a sense of responsibility.

Figure 4
Gardening activities

(Source:https://www.magnific.com/free-photo/close-up-transplanting-process-plants_17805346.htm#fromView=keyword&page=2&position=13&uuid=e3b6b97c-d8df-4329-85b5-8c524d93288b&query=Gardening+activities)

Pot-making and Clay Modelling are highly effective in developing creativity as well as fine motor coordination. Such tactile experiences allow children to explore textures and shapes, thereby strengthening both sensory perception and motor abilities.

Figure 5
Pot-making and Clay Modelling

(Source : https://www.istockphoto.com/photo/cute-smiling-little-asian-18-months-old-toddler-baby-boy-child-having-fun-playing-gm968303136-264028958)

Drawing activities enable children to visually represent their thoughts and imagination. This not only enhances creativity but also contributes to cognitive development by encouraging observation, interpretation, and expression.

Figure 6 & 7
Drawing activities


Educational excursions and field visits play a crucial role in extending learning beyond the classroom. Visits to places such as zoos, museums, and science centre's expose children to real-life contexts, thereby enriching their experiential knowledge and broadening their perspectives.

Dance and singing activities contribute significantly to physical coordination and motor skill development. These activities also promote rhythm, expression, and emotional well-being among young learners.

Figure 8

Dance and singing activities

(Source : https://www.istockphoto.com/photo/dancing-day-gm1159989044-317378015)

Cultural activities, including food festivals and fancy-dress competitions, provide opportunities for children to learn about diverse traditions and cultures in an engaging and interactive manner.

Dramatization and Role play enable children to enact real-life situations in a simulated environment. This helps in developing social understanding, empathy, and communication skills.

Figure 9

Dramatization and Role play

Source; https://www.gettyimages.com.au/photos/early-childhood-education-classroom

Games and Sports offer valuable experiential learning opportunities by promoting active participation, teamwork, and healthy competition. They also contribute to physical fitness and social development.

Figure 10

Games and Sports

(Source:https://www.magnific.com/free-photos-vectors/preschool-sports)

Toys and play-based learning materials serve as essential tools for experiential learning. Carefully selected toys stimulate curiosity, encourage exploration, and provide meaningful learning experiences in an enjoyable manner.

Figure 11

Toys and play-based learning materials

Source; https://www.gettyimages.com.au/photos/early-childhood-education-classroom

ROLE OF EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING IN SKILL DEVELOPMENT

Experiential learning not only enhances academic understanding but also fosters the development of essential life skills that are crucial for overall personality development.

(a) It promotes teamwork, social skills, and inclusion, as children engage in group activities where they learn to cooperate, share, and respect others.

(b) It develops cooperation, problem-solving abilities, and perseverance through tasks such as puzzles, model-making, and collaborative projects, which require sustained effort and critical thinking.

(c) It enhances storytelling and oral communication skills, as children interact with peers and express their ideas, thereby improving interpersonal skills and confidence.

(d) It fosters engagement and numerical understanding through activity-based learning, such as counting exercises and games, which make abstract concepts more concrete and meaningful.
(e) It encourages creativity and conceptual clarity through artistic activities like drawing and painting, allowing children to construct knowledge in an innovative manner.
(f) It promotes scientific thinking by encouraging the use of all five senses. Through exploratory activities, children observe, question, and discover, thereby developing curiosity and inquiry-based learning skills.

HOW TO INITIATE EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING IN THE CLASSROOM

Experiential learning can be easily introduced in classroom settings through thoughtful planning and active involvement of both teachers and parents.

Step I: Provide Real-Life Experiences

Children should be engaged in hands-on and real-life activities that reinforce learning. Instead of relying exclusively on textbook-based instruction, teachers can involve children in tasks such as planting seeds, building models using everyday materials, and participating in group-based learning activities. These experiences help in connecting theoretical knowledge with practical application.

Step II: Encourage Reflective Thinking

Reflection is a key component of experiential learning. Teachers and parents should encourage children to think about their experiences by asking open-ended and thought-provoking questions such as:

- What did you observe?
- Why do you think it happened?

Such questions help children develop analytical thinking and deeper understanding.

DISCUSSION

The present study underscores the vital importance of experiential learning in promoting meaningful and concrete learning during the early years of childhood. The analysis clearly indicates that when children are actively involved in learning through direct experiences, they tend to develop a deeper and more enduring understanding of concepts compared to traditional passive modes of instruction. This supports the widely accepted notion that young learners comprehend and retain knowledge more effectively when they engage in hands-on and activity-based learning environments.

A diverse range of experiential learning activities—such as art and craft, gardening, clay modelling, excursions, dramatization, and play-based practices—demonstrates that early childhood learning becomes more impactful when it is connected to real-life experiences. These activities not only stimulate creativity and imagination but also significantly contribute to the development of motor and cognitive abilities. Furthermore, experiential learning fosters holistic development by nurturing various dimensions of a child's growth, including physical, social, emotional, and intellectual aspects.

In addition to academic development, experiential learning plays a crucial role in building essential life skills among children. Through collaborative and interactive activities, children learn to cooperate, communicate effectively, and solve problems. These experiences also help them build interpersonal relationships and develop a sense of responsibility. The reflective component of experiential learning further enhances critical thinking and analytical skills, enabling children to make sense of their experiences in a meaningful way.

The importance of play as a core element of experiential learning is particularly evident. Play-based activities create a natural, enjoyable, and engaging learning environment where children can explore, experiment, and construct their own understanding. The discussion suggests that a lack of such stimulating and interactive experiences may hinder optimal development and could have long-term implications for a child's learning and overall well-being.

Moreover, the cyclical nature of experiential learning—comprising stages such as experiencing, observing, analysing, and experimenting—ensures that learning remains both active and reflective.

IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this study carry significant implications for educators, parents, curriculum developers, and policymakers involved in early childhood education.

To begin with, there is an urgent need to incorporate experiential learning approaches into early childhood curricula. Educational practices should move beyond rote memorization and instead emphasize activity-based, child-centered methods that actively involve learners. Teachers must be equipped with the necessary skills and training to design and implement experiential learning activities that are appropriate to the developmental level of children and aligned with educational goals.

Secondly, the role of the teacher needs to evolve from that of a knowledge provider to a facilitator of learning. Educators should create an environment that encourages curiosity, exploration, and reflection. By integrating real-life tasks and problem-solving activities, teachers can significantly enhance the quality and effectiveness of the learning process.

Parents, too, play a crucial role in reinforcing experiential learning beyond the classroom. They should be encouraged to provide opportunities for children to engage in hands-on activities at home, such as gardening, creative arts, and interactive play. A strong partnership between parents and teachers can ensure continuity and consistency in the child's learning experiences.

Furthermore, the significance of play-based learning must be acknowledged as a fundamental aspect of early childhood education. Schools and educational institutions should allocate sufficient time, space, and resources to facilitate play and experiential activities, recognizing their essential contribution to holistic development.

At the policy level, curriculum planners and decision-makers should prioritize the integration of experiential learning within educational frameworks. This requires the development of flexible and dynamic curricula that promote creativity, exploration, and learner autonomy, rather than rigid and content-heavy approaches.

Finally, there is a need for further research to examine the long-term effects of experiential learning on different dimensions of child development, including academic achievement, social behaviour, and emotional well-being. Such research would provide stronger evidence base and support the wider adoption of experiential learning practices in early childhood education.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, experiential learning is a powerful approach that provides meaningful and concrete learning experiences in early childhood. Through hands-on activities such as play, art, and environmental exploration, it enhances cognitive, motor, and social development.

By actively engaging with their surroundings, children develop essential life skills like creativity, cooperation, and problem-solving in a natural and enjoyable manner. Therefore, integrating experiential learning into early childhood education is essential for fostering holistic development and nurturing confident, independent learners.

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