

An Analysis of the Early Childhood Teacher Education Programs in Higher Education Institutions from the Perspective of Embodied Cognition Theory

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Abstract: With the development of socio-economic and educational landscapes, the early childhood teacher education programs within higher education institutions have grown increasingly significant. Grounded in the framework of embodied cognition theory, this paper conducts a comprehensive analysis of the early childhood teacher education programs within higher education institutions. Leveraging the insights of embodied cognition theory, recommendations are proposed for the enhancement of competent teachers' cultivation in the domain of ECE. This study further synthesizes the strengths and challenges inherent in the teacher education programs within the context of higher education institutions, underpinned by the tenets of embodied cognition theory. In doing so, this paper not only contributes actionable insights for the advancement of early childhood teacher education, but also delineates the trajectory for future research endeavors.

Key words: embodied cognition; higher education institutions; early childhood teacher education programs

1. Overview of embodied cognition theory

1. Definition and development process of embodied cognition

Embodied cognition is a cognitive science theory that aims to explain how human cognitive activities interact with the body and the environment. It differs from traditional cognitive theories in that cognitive processes are not limited to the processing of information inside the brain, but are closely related to the interaction of the human body's feelings, movements and environment. Embodied cognition theory holds that human thinking is formed through the interaction between physical experience, sensorimotor and the surrounding environment, and people's thinking and understanding ability is influenced by their body's specific movements, feelings and perceptions. Driven by the growing societal emphasis on ECE and corresponding demands, higher education institutions have established programs specializing early childhood teacher education, catering to the development of competent professionals. Early childhood education, a critical phase in education, significantly impacts children's holistic growth. The development of the programs for early childhood education teachers in higher education institutions is shaped by diverse factors.

2. Application of Embodied Cognition Theory in the Educational Context

Embodied cognition theory finds extensive applications within the realm of education. In the context of early childhood teacher education within higher education institutions, this theory can contribute to refining training programs and enhancing the quality and effectiveness of education. Firstly, embodied cognition theory underscores the significance of practical engagement. Higher education institutions should prioritize fostering student teachers' practical skills, enabling them to proficiently apply acquired knowledge in real teaching scenarios. Secondly, embodied cognition theory advocates for student teachers' autonomy in learning. Higher education institutions should encourage student teachers to actively participate in learning activities, cultivating their capacity for self-directed learning. Furthermore, the theory promotes collaborative learning, prompting higher education institutions to establish collaborative learning environments that facilitate interaction and cooperation among learners.

3. Relationship between Embodied Cognition and Early Childhood Education

Early childhood education is a pivotal educational domain that strives to facilitate holistic development and learning of children. This educational approach focuses on the physical, cognitive, emotional, and social growth of children, while emphasizing their autonomy and active engagement. Embodied cognition theory and early childhood education are closely intertwined, mutually reinforcing each other. Embodied cognition theory posits an inseparable connection between cognition and bodily sensations and actions, and the emphasis in early childhood education on children's autonomous exploration and practical engagement is precisely aligned with the promotion of their cognitive development through bodily interactions. Additionally, embodied cognition theory accentuates the interplay between children's perception and their environment. Early childhood education underscores the provision of rich sensory experiences and environmental stimuli, stimulating children's curiosity and desire for exploration. Embodied cognition theory asserts that children acquire new knowledge and experiences through interactions between their bodies and the surrounding environment.

2. Analysis of the Current State of Early Childhood Teacher Education Programs in Higher Education Institutions

1. Development and background of early childhood teacher education programs in higher education institutions

With the increasing societal emphasis on and demand for early childhood education, higher education institutions have initiated the establishment of specialized programs in early childhood teacher education. Early childhood education stands as a pivotal educational phase, exerting a critical influence on the holistic development of children. The developmental trajectory of the program for early childhood

education professionals within higher education institutions is subject to the influence of multifarious factors. Historically, concurrent with the ascendance of early childhood education, the inception of early childhood teacher education programs within higher education institutions marked a nascent phase. These programs primarily centered on disseminating educational theoretical knowledge and pedagogical skills, with the overarching intention of nurturing students into competent early childhood educators. However, as the theory and practice of early childhood education continue to evolve, a growing awareness has emerged regarding the necessity to accentuate practical engagement and aspects like child observation in the cultivation of early childhood education professionals. This realization has precipitated a gradual transformation in the early childhood teacher education programs within higher education institutions.

2. Current early childhood education programs in higher education institutions

Currently, the education programs for early childhood education teachers within higher education institutions predominantly encompass classroom instruction, practical exercises, and internship training. Classroom instruction involves the imparting and discussion of educational theoretical knowledge, encompassing foundational courses such as educational psychology and child development studies. Through classroom instruction, students gain insight into the theoretical knowledge and pertinent concepts of early childhood education, providing a theoretical foundation for subsequent practical exercises and internship training. Practical exercises involve activities such as simulated teaching and pedagogical experiments, aimed at fostering students' practical capabilities. In simulated teaching, students replicate teaching scenarios, applying pedagogical skills through the design of instructional activities. Pedagogical experiments facilitate group activities, enabling students to engage in mutual communication, discussion, and cooperation, enhancing both teamwork and teaching competencies. Internship training entails teaching practicum activities conducted by students within preschools, aimed at applying acquired knowledge and teaching skills to real-world contexts.

3. Existing problems and Challenges

Despite the progress achieved by the current education programs, several problems and challenges persist. Firstly, a prevalent problem in the training process for early childhood education teachers is the disconnection between theoretical knowledge and practical application. While classroom instruction effectively imparts theoretical knowledge, students often struggle to effectively apply this knowledge to real-world teaching scenarios. This disparity may result in confusion and setbacks when students engage in practical teaching activities. Secondly, the current programs predominantly rely on a relatively monolithic approach to learning methods, centered around teacher-led explanations and passive student reception. This narrow learning approach constrains students' opportunities for independent learning and critical thinking, thereby failing to nurture innovative thinking and problem-solving abilities.

3. Applying Embodied Cognition Theory to Early Childhood Teacher Education Programs in Higher Education Institutions

1. Training objectives and specifications

The training objectives for early childhood teachers encompass a wide range of domains. Firstly, they should acquire a solid foundation in professional knowledge, encompassing disciplines such as educational studies, psychology, and child development, enabling them to meticulously design instructional activities and guide holistic growth in young children. Secondly, they should cultivate sound educational philosophies and values, focusing on the comprehensive development of children and emphasizing the fostering of creativity and autonomy. Practical skills are equally paramount; they need to possess the ability to flexibly apply diverse educational methods and strategies to meet the diverse needs of young learners. Furthermore, they must develop skills in observing and assessing children, enabling them to adjust teaching plans based on observational outcomes and provide targeted education. The ability to engage in interdisciplinary collaboration is also indispensable; they are required to collaborate closely with parents, colleagues, and professionals to jointly promote the holistic development of children.

2. Instructional Content and Curriculum Design

Under the framework of embodied cognition theory, instructional content and curriculum design for early childhood education teachers in higher education institutions should prioritize practical exercises and sensory experiences. Traditional classroom teaching can be integrated with embodied cognition theory, merging theoretical knowledge with practical application. For instance, while teaching theories of child development, practical understanding can be deepened through observation, simulation, and participation in practical activities. Furthermore, instructional content and curriculum design should align with actual needs and educational objectives of children. Embodied cognition theory posits that cognitive activities are guided by problem-solving and goal achievement, thus, cultivation for early childhood education teachers should focus on enhancing students' abilities to address real-world issues and achieve educational goals. For example, by designing educational cases, students can analyze and resolve potential problems children may encounter in learning and development.

3. Teaching methods and strategies

Guided by the embodied cognition theory, the design of teaching methods and strategies for teacher education programs should encompass a multifaceted approach. Firstly, heuristic teaching involves posing thought-provoking questions or scenarios to stimulate students' curiosity and thinking, prompting them to consider educational issues from multiple perspectives. Secondly, inquiry-based learning entails designing tasks or projects that enable students to explore and learn autonomously from real-world problems, fostering their active learning and problem-solving abilities. Problem-solving approaches guide students to address real-world issues using acquired knowledge and skills, cultivating analytical and problem-solving capabilities. Finally, practical experiences involve participating in actual teaching internships or practice activities to cultivate practical skills. These combined methods and strategies contribute to the application of the embodied cognition theory in teacher education programs, elevating students' teaching competencies and qualities.

4. Teachers' roles and learning environment

Within the framework of embodied cognition theory, a teacher's role extends beyond knowledge dissemination and learning guidance, evolving into that of a guide and collaborative partner in students' learning journeys. Teachers should prioritize interaction and collaboration with students, offering effective guidance and feedback throughout the learning process. Additionally, teachers should actively cultivate an embodied cognition-based learning environment, encompassing abundant learning resources and advanced educational technologies. Guided by embodied cognition theory, higher education institutions can provide a more specific, practical, and experientially-rich educational environment for cultivating early childhood education teachers. Through collaboration with preschools and related institutions, students can engage with authentic educational scenarios and participate in practical activities. Simultaneously, higher education institutions can furnish relevant educational facilities and equipment to support students' practical endeavors and explorations.

5. Quality assessment

In accordance with the embodied cognition theory, assessment of early childhood student teachers should encompass various dimensions to comprehensively understand their qualities and abilities. Firstly, the assessment should encompass their knowledge and theoretical foundations, such as education and child development studies, as well as their practical skills, including instructional design and implementation. Secondly, the evaluation should address their educational values and professional ethics, investigating their capacity to prioritize child-centeredness and emphasize holistic development and autonomy in young learners. Comprehensive assessment should also encompass the educators' communication and collaborative competencies, along with their interactions with parents, colleagues, and professionals.

Dynamic assessment underscores the continuity and developmental aspect of the evaluation process. In line with the embodied cognition theory, which emphasizes the integration of knowledge and practice, assessment should be able to track changes and growth in early childhood student teachers' educational practices. Assessment should not be confined to specific time points but conducted repeatedly throughout students' professional development, capturing their progress and accomplishments. Additionally, assessment should provide feedback and guidance to the students, aiding them in recognizing their strengths and areas for improvement, while motivating them to continuously enhance their educational proficiency.

4. Conclusion

By applying the guidance of embodied cognition theory, higher education institutions can optimize curriculum and pedagogy design for early childhood teacher education programs, thereby enhancing the effectiveness and quality of education. Nevertheless, the application of embodied cognition theory in early childhood teacher education presents challenges that encompass the need for curriculum and instructional method reconfigurations, the development of robust assessment tools, resolution of resource and support limitations, accommodation of diverse educational practitioner styles, and overcoming institutional resistance to change. Addressing these challenges requires collaborative efforts among educators, researchers, policymakers, and higher education institutions to develop effective strategies that successfully integrate embodied cognition theory into early childhood teacher education.

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