

A Study on the “Competency View” of Core Literacy Curriculum Based on Dewey’s Empiricist Philosophy

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Abstract

In the context of education in the new era, the cultivation of students’ core competencies and the enhancement of their core abilities are of paramount importance. Core competencies are critical factors for personal success and societal well-being, while core abilities are key elements for career development and the realization of value. Based on the analysis of Dewey’s empiricist philosophy, the cultivation of core competencies and the enhancement of core abilities lies in transforming traditional curricula and teaching methods, reforming and innovating educational experiences, and facilitating the integration of knowledge with practical application.

Keywords: empiricism, core competencies, perspective on abilities

1. Transition from a Knowledge-Centered Era to the Core Literacy Era

1.1 Core Literacy: A Beacon for 21st-Century Educational Reform

Since December 1997, when the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) launched the project “Definition and Selection of Competencies: Theoretical and Conceptual Foundations” (DeSeCo), introducing the concept of Key Competencies, international research on core literacy has made significant progress. Over the past two decades, a comprehensive research system on core literacy has been developed, encompassing its conceptual and value frameworks, structural frameworks, curriculum and teaching systems, and quality assurance mechanisms. This robust theoretical system has provided essential guidance for practices ranging from societal implementation to classroom instruction.

The formation of the theoretical system of core literacy abroad is rooted in addressing practical issues or developmental needs within specific national or regional contexts. As the primary advocate of Key Competencies, the OECD structured the research for the DeSeCo project as follows: first, defining the function of Key Competencies as enabling individual success and societal well-being; then, analyzing societal visions and individual life needs; subsequently, developing the theoretical components of core literacy, integrating diverse perspectives, and categorizing them into a coherent framework; and finally, establishing a conceptual reference framework for DeSeCo Key Competencies. This framework serves as a foundation for implementing Key Competencies through curriculum, teaching, and support systems. Many international organizations, countries, and regions have since adopted this research approach.

Another major contributor to core literacy research is UNESCO. The organization’s 1972 report *Learning to Be: The World of Education Today and Tomorrow* (Faure Report) called for advancing lifelong education and creating learning societies, challenging the instrumental rationality of education and emphasizing the intrinsic value of holistic individual development. The 1996 report *Learning: The Treasure Within* (Delors Report) further declared education as a fundamental human right and proposed four pillars of learning for the 21st century: learning to know, learning to do, learning to live together, and learning to be. More recently, in 2015, UNESCO published *Rethinking Education: Towards a Global Common Good*, advocating for education that teaches

individuals how to live sustainably on a stressed planet. This report emphasized cultural literacy, respect, equality, and the integration of social, economic, and environmental sustainability, with a focus on the intrinsic value of human dignity and a commitment to global common interests.

As part of the highly developed globalized socio-economic landscape, China naturally shares these value aspirations. Academic discussions on core literacy in China began with the introduction of related concepts in the early 2010s. One of the earliest articles to explore the notion of 21st-century core literacy was Cai Qingtian's 2012 piece, *Key Competencies: The Goal of New Curriculum Reform*, published in *China Social Sciences Today*. This was followed by a surge of related academic papers starting in 2013. On April 24, 2014, the Ministry of Education issued the policy document *Opinions on Deepening Curriculum Reform and Implementing the Fundamental Task of Moral Education*, which formally elevated core literacy to a prominent position in China's education reform agenda. Since then, core literacy has become a critical benchmark guiding the country's education reform efforts.

1.2 The Competency Perspective: A Pillar of Core Literacy Curriculum and Teaching

Core literacy (Key Competencies), where "Competencies" in the English context refers to capability or proficiency, highlights the importance of ability as a key criterion in education. This marks a shift from the traditional emphasis on knowledge as the central focus of teaching and learning. The competency perspective has become the cornerstone of core literacy curriculum and pedagogy, driving a fundamental transformation from subject-based instruction to discipline-oriented education.

Subject-based teaching, from a traditional perspective, represents a narrow and rigid mode of instruction. It often degenerates into the mere transmission of subject knowledge, with teachers leading students through exhaustive coverage of textbook material. Whether the focus is on memorization, understanding, mastery, application, close reading, or independent study, all content in the textbook — including notes and explanations — tends to be treated as examinable knowledge points. This approach, heavily reliant on rote training and assessments, seeks outcomes such as recitation, problem-solving, and exam readiness, often employing an authoritarian, knowledge-centric methodology. The root cause of this phenomenon lies in the persistent dominance of knowledge-centered thinking in education, where teaching is equated with transmitting and memorizing knowledge, neglecting the fundamental questions of why and how students should learn.

Discipline-oriented education, in contrast, broadens the scope of learning to include dynamic, life-enriching experiences that align with students' developmental stages and cognitive patterns. This approach not only incorporates subject-based instruction but also transforms "static knowledge" into "living memory." It optimizes learning methods, diversifies instructional strategies, and connects traditional knowledge with personal experiences, fostering more active and engaged learning. Educational activities are framed as spiritual endeavors of the learner, nurturing students' disciplinary literacy, enhancing their thinking skills, and cultivating their inner character and emotional well-being. Learning behavior and methods are ultimately determined by the learner's mental state. Thus, teaching that solely emphasizes external performance without addressing the learner's inner life is unlikely to achieve meaningful educational goals.

The purpose of discipline-oriented education is to imbue the subject matter with deeper relevance, allowing it to resonate with the students' inner selves and influence their intellectual and emotional growth directly or indirectly.

2. Interpreting the Competency Perspective Through Dewey's "Experience" Philosophy

The shift in the curriculum perspective of core literacy from a knowledge-centered to an ability-centered approach can be traced back to the historical opposition between "discipline-centered theory" and "child-centered theory." The epistemological root of this dichotomy lies in dualistic thinking, which artificially fragments originally unified wholes — such as direct and indirect experiences, humanism and scientism, knowledge and ability, individuals and society, and disciplinary specialization and integration — into opposing categories.

In the early 20th century, educational philosopher John Dewey, through his unique concept of "experience," dissolved the rigid dichotomy between children and disciplines. He established the foundation for what he termed an "experiential naturalistic curriculum." Dewey's philosophical outlook provided the basis for his curriculum perspective, which can be seen as an extension of his broader philosophical ideas. His work made a significant contribution to overcoming dualistic thinking within the field of curriculum development.

2.1 Core Literacy Competency Through Dewey's Concept of Experience

In John Dewey's empiricist philosophy, the concept of experience transcends the traditional opposition to reason. Experience is no longer seen as the passive accumulation of fragmented sensory impressions but as a dynamic process of interaction between the organism and its environment. In this process, the organism is not only shaped

by the environment but also actively modifies it, turning experience into an act of “doing.” Dewey states that in the course of experience, we do not merely replicate the past or await accidental occurrences to prompt change; instead, we use past experiences to create new and improved ones. As such, “experience inherently guides the process of its own improvement,” making it a self-regulating and constructive phenomenon. Experience contains within itself the principles of connection and organization, requiring no external “reason” to impose these principles. For Dewey, reason is not an abstract system or mystical faculty but a form of “intelligence” — a tool that makes experience (including action and behavior) more effective. This “intelligence” aligns with the competency perspective central to core literacy today, as the process of experience itself is simultaneously a process of applying intelligence and developing ability.

In *Democracy and Education*, Dewey profoundly analyzes the roles of sensation and reason in reconstructing experience. He argues: “Without the active responses of sensory organs that distinguish particulars, there can be no material for knowledge and no development of intellect. Without placing these particulars within the background of meanings distilled from past extensive experiences — without employing reason or thought — these particulars remain mere excitations or stimuli.” Both the empiricist and rationalist schools, Dewey contends, fail to recognize the interconnected roles of sensory stimuli and thought in applying past experiences to new ones, thereby maintaining the continuity and coherence of life. Dewey further states: “Reason is the capacity to utilize prior experiences to interpret the meanings of new experiences. A rational individual observes events that directly contact their senses in relation to shared human experiences, rather than treating them as isolated occurrences.”

Core literacy emphasizes contextuality, and Dewey’s concept of “situation” refers to the interaction of objective external conditions and internal factors within experience. This dual interaction — not merely the external conditions — plays a critical role in guiding the formation of students’ competencies, offering valuable insights for their development.

2.2 Expanding Core Literacy Competency Through Dewey’s Broadened Notion of Experience

Western modern philosophy, particularly British empiricism, often regards experience as a stage in the process of cognition, closely linking it to sensory perception. Empiricism thus evolved into a theory of sensation and knowledge, with epistemology occupying a central position in modern philosophy. Discussions focused on the value and origin of knowledge (cognition), with sensory perception, often referred to as the “gateway to knowledge,” playing a crucial role in these debates.

John Dewey argued that his new conception of experience rendered many traditional epistemological debates meaningless. While knowledge remains important, the primary fact and fundamental category now lies in the “interaction between the organism and the environment during the process of adaptation.” Knowledge is subordinate to this adaptive interaction, and questions about its origin become secondary. Knowledge is no longer an isolated, self-sufficient entity, and sensory perception loses its status as the exclusive gateway to knowledge, instead becoming a stimulus for action.

Core literacy emphasizes the transformation of knowledge into ability. While knowledge remains important, its value is diminished if it remains confined to the cognitive domain. Knowledge must be converted into ability — a principle central to Dewey’s pragmatist philosophy. Viewing core literacy as a competency perspective necessitates a redefinition of experience, which is no longer solely a cognitive matter. Instead, it encompasses rational and non-rational factors, including cognition, emotion, and volition.

In education, Dewey’s principles of “learning by doing” and “learning from experience” extend beyond mere knowledge acquisition. Experience becomes the vehicle for children’s holistic development and growth. The “reconstruction of experience,” as emphasized in Dewey’s dictum “education as the reconstruction of experience,” is not simply about accumulating knowledge. It involves the comprehensive transformation and development of all facets of a person’s physical and mental being. This holistic growth, grounded in experience, constitutes students’ literacy — or, more precisely, their abilities.

2.3 Principles of Experience in Cultivating Core Competencies

Not everything can be classified as experience, and not all experiences hold educational value. Dewey argued that while all meaningful education arises from experience, not every experience inherently or equally contributes to education. For experience to be effective and creative, it must meet certain criteria. Dewey proposed two guiding principles for evaluating the educational value of experience: the principle of continuity and the principle of interaction.

The Principle of Continuity

The principle of continuity emphasizes that individuals draw from past experiences to influence and shape the nature of future experiences. Dewey stated, “The mind reaches itself through a logical process, although the

logical movement of this fact remains unseen.” The accumulation of growth endows experience with vitality, illustrating the critical importance of growth for meaningful experiences. The value of an experience can be measured by whether individuals can perceive its relationships and continuity—this is the essence of the principle of continuity.

To minimize errors in reasoning, individuals must engage multiple sensory faculties across diverse experiences to refine their rationality. They must rely on rational understandings repeatedly validated by themselves and others through experience—such as the law of non-contradiction—to ensure solid and reliable cognition. This process of rational growth underscores the inherent goodness within the accumulation of experience. Every phenomenon is connected in some way to others in the world, forming a fundamental basis for the principle of continuity.

In modern education, however, there is often a disconnect between the transmission of knowledge and the cultivation of wisdom. While education has never lacked progressive ideas, Dewey’s empiricist philosophy and the educational principles derived from it have profound implications for practice, such as emphasizing the integrative nature of education. The transition in the 21st century from a knowledge-centered era to one centered on core literacy reflects a response to these ideas. Cultivating students’ core abilities requires a redefinition of experience and an embrace of organic, integrative, and inclusive education.

The Principle of Interaction

The principle of interaction highlights that individuals live in a constantly changing set of situations, illustrating the perpetual interaction between people and their environment as well as between individuals. This interaction reflects intentional expression, with personal experience emerging as the product of such interactions. Experience consists of both active and passive elements, uniquely combined. The active aspect of experience involves experimentation, while the passive aspect involves the results of undergoing those experiments. The connection between these two dimensions allows the effectiveness of an experience to be evaluated, enabling the internal intention of the mind to project itself outward.

As an activity deepens, the changes it produces in the environment are reflected back onto the individual, creating a richer experience. It is precisely this principle of interaction that facilitates the transformation of knowledge into ability. For example, a baby might lack the knowledge that “flames can burn,” but upon touching a flame, the child perceives its light, heat, and burning capacity. This constitutes an experience because the child learns that touching fire results in pain, forming a basis for future actions. Thus, the transformation of knowledge into ability arises from the psychological significance generated through situational interactions. Without this interaction, knowledge remains static and inert.

3. Conclusion

Dewey’s views on experience and education provide profound insights into the cultivation of students’ core competencies. First, teaching should emphasize the unification of students’ active and passive engagement in acquiring knowledge. In education, “the value of curricular knowledge cannot be judged by the standard of ‘what knowledge is most valuable,’ but rather by the standard of children’s growth and societal value.”

Second, the role and position of teachers in facilitating students’ acquisition of experience must be reevaluated. Teachers should create reflective contexts for learning, as education is the reconstruction of experience. This process inherently involves elements of knowledge and rationality (or wisdom), which are essential conditions for children to understand and navigate new experiences. To transform knowledge (disciplinary teaching) into ability (disciplinary education), it is necessary to carefully examine the connotations and extensions of experience as well as the principles underlying its reconstruction.

The value objectives of core literacy encompass both personal success and social realization. Consequently, students’ core competencies inherently include these two dimensions. Dewey’s concept of “reconstructing experience” not only emphasizes the individual dimension but also integrates the social dimension, inherently linking experience to democracy. This connection continues to hold significant relevance in contemporary educational discourse.

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