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A Study on Inquiry-Based Learning Paths for Cultivating Creative Thinking in Preschool Children from the Perspective of Peer Collaboration

Ta La[1,*]. TSERENNADMID/SHAGDARSUREN[2]
[1,2]Mongolian National University of Education, Mongolian
Email: tala1219@163.com

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Abstract

Against the backdrop of preschool education shifting from knowledge enlightenment to core competency cultivation, the development of children's creative thinking has increasingly become an important issue in educational practice. Based on the understanding that peer collaboration and inquiry-based learning are naturally compatible, this paper focuses on "inquiry-based learning paths for cultivating children's creative thinking from the perspective of peer collaboration." It systematically examines the intrinsic relationship between peer collaboration, inquiry-based learning, and children's creative thinking by comprehensively employing conceptual analysis and theoretical interpretation. Supported by constructivist learning theory, social constructivist theory, zone of proximal development theory, inquiry-based education theory, and creativity development theory, the paper analyzes current problems in kindergartens' creative thinking cultivation practices, such as unclear training objectives, formalized inquiry-based learning, superficial peer collaboration, insufficient teacher support, and a single evaluation mechanism, and further reveals their causes. Based on this, it proposes an inquiry-based learning path guided by children's subjectivity, authentic problems, interactive generative nature, appropriate support, and process-oriented evaluation. Specifically, this includes creating authentic inquiry situations, organizing effective peer collaboration, stimulating divergent thinking and creative expression, supporting reflection and iterative improvement, and improving teacher support and evaluation mechanisms. Research suggests that peer collaboration is not only an organizational form for young children to complete tasks together, but also a crucial mechanism for promoting the exchange of ideas, the reorganization of experiences, and innovative expression. Inquiry-based learning, on the other hand, provides authentic task platforms and dynamic spaces for the development of creative thinking. The organic combination of these two approaches helps to construct a creative thinking cultivation path that aligns with the developmental characteristics of young children, and provides theoretical reference and practical

basis for improving kindergarten curriculum activities and teacher practice.

Keywords

Peer collaboration; Inquiry-based learning; Young children's creative thinking

1. Introduction

Against the backdrop of preschool education gradually shifting from knowledge enlightenment to the cultivation of core competencies, the development of children's creative thinking has become an important issue of concern in educational research and practice. Creative thinking is not only related to children's problem-solving abilities, imaginative expression, and diverse problem-solving skills, but also influences their independent thinking, collaborative interaction, and the formation of innovative awareness in subsequent learning. For preschoolers, creative thinking is not simply manifested as "novel ideas," but rather as a comprehensive thinking quality reflected in the ability to propose different ideas, try multiple methods, generate unique expressions, and continuously adjust action plans when facing specific life situations, play tasks, and exploration activities.

Current kindergarten education practices, while increasingly diverse in activity design aimed at cultivating creative thinking, still present several challenges: First, some teaching activities remain teacher-pre-designed and outcome-oriented, leaving insufficient space for children to independently discover problems, formulate hypotheses, and repeatedly verify them. Second, while inquiry-based activities are widely advocated, their implementation often remains at the level of simply "doing activities," neglecting crucial mechanisms such as collaborative interaction, cognitive conflict, and co-construction. Third, research on cultivating children's creative thinking often focuses on individual performance or activity evaluation, with insufficient exploration of "how to form a stable, operable, and transferable cultivation path through inquiry-based learning in peer collaboration."

Peer collaboration provides children with an open social interaction environment. Through discussions, division of labor, comparison of solutions, resolution of differences, and sharing of results with peers, children not only gain new experiential stimulation and opportunities for expression but also more easily generate intellectual collisions, leading to problem reconstruction, viewpoint revision, and methodological innovation. Inquiry-based learning, emphasizing problem-based learning, operation and experience as its foundation, and continuous reflection and meaning construction as its core, provides authentic task carriers and dynamic generative space for the development of creative thinking. Therefore, combining peer collaboration with inquiry-based learning not only possesses strong educational relevance but may also become an important practical pathway for promoting the cultivation of creative thinking in young children.

Based on this, this study focuses on the core topic of "Inquiry-based Learning Paths for Cultivating Creative Thinking in Young Children from the Perspective of Peer Collaboration," attempting to conduct a systematic analysis from the perspectives of concept definition, theoretical support, problem diagnosis, and pathway construction. The study aims to answer the following fundamental questions: First, what are the intrinsic connections between peer collaboration, inquiry-based learning, and children's creative thinking? Second, what are the key issues currently hindering the cultivation of creative thinking in kindergartens' related practices? Third, how can we construct inquiry-based learning pathways that are phased, operational, and have promotional value based on the characteristics of children's physical and mental development and the needs of the educational setting? The significance of this research lies in providing a relatively clear theoretical framework for the cultivation of children's creative thinking, and on the other hand, offering practical ideas that can be referenced for improving kindergarten curriculum activity design, teacher organization and support, and evaluation.

2. Concept Definition

2.1. Peer Collaboration

Peer collaboration refers to the interactive process in which children of similar age and developmental level complete learning activities through communication, negotiation, division of labor, mutual assistance, and sharing in a shared task or context. Unlike general peer interaction, peer collaboration emphasizes joint participation and co-construction around a specific task. Its core is not merely "being together," but "meaningful interaction driven by a common goal." In this study, peer collaboration is mainly manifested in children's joint discovery of problems, joint discussion of solutions, joint operation and verification, joint expression of results, and joint reflection and improvement during inquiry activities.

2.2. Inquiry Learning

Inquiry learning refers to a learning method in which learners actively construct experience and understanding around real problems or tasks through observation, questioning, conjecture, operation, verification, expression, and reflection. For preschool children, inquiry learning is not equivalent to rigorous scientific research, but rather an experiential, operational, and contextual learning process that aligns with their age characteristics. Its key characteristics include: problem-oriented, experience-based, continuous interaction-supported, and diverse expression as the outcome. In this study, inquiry-based learning specifically refers to activity-based learning embedded in daily kindergarten curriculum, games, and life situations.

2.3. Creative Thinking of Young

Children Young children's creative thinking refers to the ability of young children to break through the inertia of single experiences, generate diverse ideas, try novel

methods, and make personalized expressions when faced with specific situations, tasks, or problems. Its basic manifestations usually include dimensions such as fluency, flexibility, originality, and refinement. However, in the early childhood stage, more attention should be paid to its overt behavioral characteristics, such as daring to ask questions, being good at association, being able to change methods, being willing to try different materials, and being able to reprocess existing works or plans. Therefore, the creative thinking of young children discussed in this study is not the abstract creative ability under adult standards, but rather the imagination, reorganization, flexibility, and innovative expression abilities reflected in the process of inquiry.

3. Current Problems and Causes of the Cultivation of Young Children's Creative Thinking

3.1. Insufficient Clarity of Cultivation Goals

In current kindergarten education practice, although the cultivation of creative thinking has gradually entered the scope of curriculum and activity design, at the specific implementation level, the cultivation goals still exhibit a relatively obvious tendency towards ambiguity. While some teachers acknowledge the important value of creative thinking, they lack a clear understanding of core issues such as "what to cultivate," "to what extent to cultivate," and "how to demonstrate the cultivation results." In practice, creative thinking is often broadly understood as "encouraging children to speak, do, and think more," without further refinement into specific dimensions such as daring to ask questions, being able to make associations, being good at adapting, being willing to try, and expressing individuality. This results in relatively vague goal setting in educational activities, making it difficult to form a stable and continuous cultivation orientation.

This problem arises partly from some teachers' insufficient understanding of the connotation of creative thinking. Children's creative thinking is not high-level innovative ability in the adult sense, but rather manifested in diverse ideas, methodological flexibility, and novel expressions in daily exploration and play. However, in actual teaching, some teachers still tend to understand the value of activities from the perspective of knowledge acquisition or task completion, paying insufficient attention to the development of thinking skills. On the other hand, current curriculum activity designs still largely revolve around the presentation of results, emphasizing whether the work is complete, the answer is correct, and the activity goes smoothly, while lacking systematic attention to children's questioning behavior, trial-and-error process, and idea generation during the inquiry process. Due to the lack of clear training objectives, the cultivation of creative thinking easily remains at the conceptual level, making it difficult to truly transform into operational educational practice.

3.2. Formalization of Inquiry Learning

Inquiry learning should be a dynamic process in which children actively observe, propose hypotheses, verify through operation, and reflect and adjust in real problem situations. However, current practice shows that some kindergarten inquiry activities have a clear tendency towards formalization. On the surface, the activities include questions, materials, and operations, and also arrange for exchange and presentation sessions. However, in reality, the inquiry process is often pre-planned by teachers as fixed steps, and children simply complete tasks according to a predetermined process, lacking genuine problem discovery and independent exploration. Inquiry is thus simplified to "doing an activity" or "completing an operational task," weakening its inherent openness, generativity, and uncertainty, making it difficult to effectively support the development of creative thinking. There are two main reasons for this problem. First, some teachers are deeply influenced by traditional teaching methods. To ensure classroom order, improve activity efficiency, or achieve predetermined goals, they often pre-design questions, steps, and results, constantly guiding children towards the "standard answer" during implementation. While this highly controlled organizational approach seems to improve the completeness of the activity, it reduces the space for children to independently raise questions, try different methods, and experience failures and corrections. Second, some teachers' understanding of inquiry-based learning remains at the operational level, believing that as long as children "do it," it constitutes inquiry, while neglecting the more crucial thinking processes of conjecture, comparison, discussion, correction, and reconstruction in inquiry activities. Because inquiry is ritualized and proceduralized, opportunities for the development of children's creative thinking are reduced.

3.3. Superficial Peer Collaboration

Peer collaboration is an important mechanism for promoting the growth of children's creative thinking, but in reality, peer collaboration often exhibits superficial and loose characteristics. While some activities employ a group format, allowing children to complete a task together, cooperation often merely manifests as "sitting together," "operating together," or "taking turns speaking," lacking genuine communication, negotiation, the clash of ideas, and collaborative construction. Some children dominate the collaboration, while others simply follow or agree; others remain at the level of task allocation, emphasizing "you do this, I do that," without joint discussion of the problem or collaborative generation of solutions. Such peer collaboration fails to truly transform into an interactive resource that promotes cognitive development.

The root cause of this problem lies in teachers' insufficient understanding of the value and organizational mechanisms of peer collaboration. Some teachers equate collaboration simply with "group activities," neglecting the inherent requirements of collaboration: clearly defined common goals, role-playing, and the experience of cognitive negotiation. In activity design, if there is a lack of worthy problems to

solve together, a lack of multiple solutions to compare and choose from, and a lack of an atmosphere that encourages the expression of differences, then effective cognitive interaction among children is difficult to achieve. Furthermore, young children are still developing in terms of language expression, emotional regulation, and rule awareness. If teachers lack necessary support and guidance, cooperation can easily become superficial, even leading to phenomena such as fighting over materials, monopolizing discourse, or mutual dependence. Therefore, high-quality interaction does not occur naturally through peer collaboration; it requires conscious design and support from teachers.

3.4. Inadequate Teacher Support

In cultivating children's creative thinking, teachers are not only creators of the activity environment but also supporters of the inquiry process and facilitators of peer collaboration. However, current practice shows that insufficient or inappropriate teacher support is quite common. Some teachers either over-intervene in activities, frequently providing hints, answers, and operational methods, thus compressing children's space for independent thinking; or they provide insufficient support, focusing only on the superficial order of the activity and failing to respond promptly to difficulties, disagreements, and new ideas that arise during children's exploration. Other teachers, while paying attention to children's performance, offer only simplistic support, mostly limited to encouraging language, lacking professional guidance on problem-solving, expanding thinking, and coordinating cooperation.

This problem is primarily related to insufficient professional preparation among teachers. Cultivating creative thinking is not merely about "encouraging children to think boldly," but requires teachers to be adept at identifying key points in children's exploration, such as the emergence of problems, cognitive conflicts, obstacles to cooperation, and the generation of expression, and to provide appropriate support accordingly. However, in reality, some teachers lack a precise grasp of the timing, methods, and boundaries of support during exploration activities. Secondly, teachers often face multiple pressures in frontline teaching, including curriculum progress, activity safety, and classroom management. Therefore, when organizing exploration-based learning, they tend to choose highly controllable methods, while harboring some concerns about open exploration and collaborative generation. The ultimate result is that teacher support neither fully unleashes children's initiative nor effectively ensures the in-depth development of exploration activities.

3.5. Simplistic Evaluation Mechanisms

Evaluation is a crucial element guiding educational practice, but current evaluation mechanisms for cultivating children's creative thinking remain relatively simplistic. Some evaluations primarily focus on the results of the activity, such as whether the

work is completed, whether the operation is standardized, and whether the answer is correct, while paying insufficient attention to children's questioning performance, the number of ideas, methodological changes, the quality of cooperation, and reflective abilities during the exploration process. Some assessments, while emphasizing process, lack clear standards and systematic records, easily remaining at the level of teachers' impression-based judgments. This simplification of assessment methods not only fails to accurately reflect the development of children's creative thinking but also easily leads teachers and parents to continue to understand children's learning from a results-oriented perspective.

This problem arises because children's creative thinking is inherently process-oriented, context-dependent, and varies from person to person, unlike knowledge acquisition which can be easily judged by uniform standards. Therefore, teachers often lack mature and operational assessment tools in practice. At the same time, some teachers still habitually use "how good is the work?" or "whether the task is completed?" as the main evaluation criteria, ignoring the children's exploratory courage, expressive differences, and shifts in thinking demonstrated during activities. Furthermore, the traditional understanding of "excellent performance" in home-school collaboration also reinforces the preference for standardized results. This singular assessment mechanism, in turn, affects teaching objectives and activity organization, making it difficult to truly cultivate creative thinking through a process-oriented approach.

4. Construction of the Inquiry Learning Path for Cultivating Young Children's Creative Thinking from the Perspective of Peer Collaboration

4.1. Guiding Principles for Path Construction

Based on the above problem analysis, the construction of an inquiry learning path for cultivating young children's creative thinking should follow the following basic principles:

First, adhere to the principle of children's subjectivity. Path construction should respect children's age characteristics, interests, needs, and experience base, treating children as active explorers and meaning constructors, rather than passive recipients of tasks. Sufficient autonomy should be reserved for children in all aspects, including question posing, material use, and result expression.

Second, adhere to the principle of authentic problem situations. The development of creative thinking cannot be separated from authentic and meaningful problem stimuli. Therefore, inquiry activities should, as far as possible, originate from children's life, play, and curriculum experiences, enabling children to participate willingly, understand, and generate inquiry motivation from genuine needs.

Third, adhere to the principle of peer interaction and generative mechanisms. Path construction should not only focus on "how children think," but also on "how

children generate new ideas through interaction with peers." Therefore, peer collaboration should be considered an important organizational mechanism for inquiry-based learning, promoting thinking development through negotiation, comparison, co-creation, and sharing.

Fourth, adhere to the principle of appropriate teacher support. Teachers should neither over-replace nor completely relinquish control, but rather provide timely, appropriate, and sufficient support based on the children's inquiry progress, ensuring effective progress while protecting openness.

Fifth, adhere to the principle of process-oriented evaluation. Cultivating creative thinking is not something that can be accomplished in a single activity; it requires continuous exploration, repeated expression, and constant adjustment. Therefore, pathway construction should embed evaluation throughout the entire process, focusing on the dynamic changes in children's thinking, rather than judging solely by the final result.

4.2. Creating Authentic Inquiry Situations

Authentic and engaging problem situations are the starting point for stimulating children's interest in inquiry and creative expression. In implementing the pathway, teachers should extract inquisitive questions from children's daily lives, play experiences, nature observations, festival activities, and classroom events, ensuring that the questions are both relevant to children's experiences and possess a certain degree of openness and challenge. For example, in construction games, exploration can revolve around questions like "How to make the bridge more stable?" and "How to make the toy car go further?"; in nature corner activities, children can be guided to think about "Why do some seeds germinate quickly while others germinate slowly?"; and in art activities, tasks such as "How to make moving works using different materials" can be designed. Such scenarios are more likely to stimulate children's active questioning and diverse attempts.

When creating scenarios, teachers should also avoid overly closed questions or overly singular answers. If a question corresponds to only a single conclusion, children's exploration often becomes a process of finding the "correct answer," which is not conducive to the development of creative thinking. Conversely, open-ended questions can provide children with multiple possibilities, prompting them to continuously imagine, compare, and revise. At the same time, teachers can use story introductions, situational dialogues, material conflicts, and task challenges to enhance the interest and suspense of the problem scenario, driving children's exploration with the intrinsic motivation of "wanting to solve the problem." It can be said that real-life scenarios are not only the background of exploration activities but also the direct trigger for the generation of creative thinking.

4.3. Organizing Effective Peer Collaboration

Effective peer collaboration is not simply grouping, but a purposeful interactive

process centered around a common problem. To ensure that peer collaboration truly becomes a driving force for the development of creative thinking, teachers should first clarify the commonality of the collaborative task. This means that children are facing a problem that requires joint discussion, experimentation, and improvement, rather than several independent small tasks. Only when the task itself necessitates collaboration is genuine interaction among children more likely to occur.

Secondly, teachers should optimize the organization of collaboration. Based on children's age characteristics and individual differences, teachers can adopt forms such as pair work, small group work, or cross-group communication. Role prompts can promote balanced participation, such as assigning roles like "idea proposer," "material experimenter," "recorder," and "result sharer," ensuring that every child has the opportunity to participate and express their thoughts. Simultaneously, during the collaboration process, teachers should encourage children to discuss the problem, such as "Why do you think this way?", "Are there other methods?", and "Can we combine the two ideas?" This will guide children from simple manipulation to the exchange of viewpoints and the integration of ideas.

Thirdly, the value of cognitive conflict and differences in collaboration should be emphasized. When children have different opinions, teachers should not rush to provide a standard answer but rather transform disagreements into opportunities for further exploration. Teachers should guide children to compare different solutions, verify different conjectures, and gradually form new understandings through interaction. Truly valuable peer collaboration doesn't eliminate differences, but rather transforms them into resources for intellectual growth. Through this collaborative approach, children not only learn to complete tasks together but also enhance their adaptability and innovative expression skills through communication and interaction.

4.4. Encouraging Divergent Thinking and Creative Expression

The key to cultivating creative thinking lies in providing children with space for multi-directional thinking and diverse expression. Therefore, in inquiry-based learning pathways, activities conducive to the development of divergent thinking should be consciously incorporated. Teachers can stimulate children's associations through open-ended questions, such as "Besides doing it this way, how else can we do it?", "What if we don't have enough materials?", and "Can we make it more special?" They can also encourage children to break free from single-experience patterns and try new methods and combinations by providing various materials, showcasing multiple examples, and allowing different paths to complete tasks.

At the same time, the diversity of creative expression should be emphasized. Children's creativity is not only reflected in verbal responses but also in various forms such as physical performance, artwork construction, material recombination, image expression, and situational storytelling. Therefore, teachers should not

restrict children's performance with uniform results but should encourage them to present their exploration results in ways they are good at. For example, when expressing "how to make the work more stable," some children might explain by rebuilding, some by drawing, and others by verbal description or role-playing. These different forms of expression should be given equal respect and attention.

Furthermore, teachers should create a relaxed, safe atmosphere that allows for trial and error. Only when children feel that "different ideas are allowed" and "they can try again after failure" will they be more willing to propose new ideas and express themselves uniquely. In other words, encouraging divergent thinking and creative expression is not just a technical questioning strategy, but also a construction of an educational culture that supports differences and embraces experimentation.

4.5. Supporting Reflection and Iterative Improvement

The development of creative thinking is not limited to "thinking of a new way," but also involves reviewing, revising, and reconstructing existing ideas and processes. Therefore, reflection and iteration should be indispensable components in the inquiry-based learning path. After the activity, teachers can guide children to review their inquiry process, such as "What did we think at the beginning?", "Why did we change our method later?", "Where did we encounter difficulties?", and "What inspiration did other people's methods give you?" Through such reflection, young children gradually become aware of the process of changing their thinking, understanding that creation is not a one-time event but a gradual process of adjustment.

Based on this, children should be encouraged to try again and refine their ideas. If children achieve initial results in their first exploration, teachers can continue to introduce new constraints or raise the requirements of the task, such as "What if the wind is stronger?", "Can you still make it if you can only use two materials?", "Can you make it look better and have more functions?", prompting children to continue to optimize their original solutions. This iterative process helps children move from simple attempts to deeper levels of flexibility and refined expression.

It is worth noting that reflection does not mean that teachers judge the results of children's work, but rather helps children discover changes in their own thinking and actions, gradually forming a preliminary metacognitive awareness. Through the cycle of "trying—discovering problems—adjusting solutions—trying again," children's creative thinking can move from scattered expressions to a relatively stable development path.

4.6. Improving Teacher Support and Evaluation Mechanisms

To ensure the effective implementation of this path, it is essential to simultaneously improve teacher support methods and evaluation mechanisms. First, in terms of teacher support, teachers should be encouraged to shift from "activity controllers" to "learning supporters." Teachers need to learn to observe children's true state

during exploration, identifying their points of interest, difficulties, and emergent points, and providing appropriate support through questioning, prompting, follow-up questioning, demonstration, and coordination. For example, when children lack ideas, teachers can stimulate their associations through follow-up questions; when conflicts arise in cooperation, teachers can help children reiterate the task objectives and organize negotiations; when children's expression is unclear, teachers can use materials, diagrams, or actions to help them fully present their ideas. The key to teacher support is not to replace children in completing tasks, but to help them transform their potential abilities into actual performance.

Secondly, regarding the evaluation mechanism, an evaluation system characterized by process-orientation, diversification, and development should be established. Evaluation content should not only include the exploration results but also focus on children's questioning awareness, the richness of their ideas, the flexibility of their methods, their cooperative participation, the uniqueness of their expression, and their ability to reflect and improve. Evaluation methods can comprehensively utilize teacher observation records, analysis of children's work, peer sharing, process videos, and growth portfolios to dynamically track the development of children's creative thinking.

At the same time, the motivational and diagnostic functions of evaluation should be emphasized. The purpose of evaluation is not simply to distinguish between good and bad, but to help teachers understand the true development of children in inquiry and collaboration, providing a basis for subsequent activity design and support strategy adjustments. Only when teacher support and evaluation mechanisms work in synergy can the inquiry-based learning path for cultivating children's creative thinking be truly implemented and continuously optimized in practice.

5. Conclusion

Exploring the inquiry-based learning path for cultivating children's creative thinking from the perspective of peer collaboration responds to the current transformation of preschool education from knowledge transmission to core competency development, and also aligns with the developmental pattern of children's learning, which is characterized by experience, interaction, and generative processes. Research shows that the cultivation of children's creative thinking cannot be achieved solely through a single type of activity or a single training session, but needs to be gradually formed in real-world problem situations through continuous inquiry practice, effective peer collaboration, appropriate teacher support, and a developmental evaluation mechanism.

Currently, relevant practices in kindergartens still face real problems such as unclear training objectives, formalized inquiry learning, superficial peer collaboration, insufficient teacher support, and a single evaluation mechanism.

These problems, to some extent, restrict the natural emergence and sustainable development of children's creative thinking. Therefore, based on the fundamental principles of child-centeredness, authentic problems, interactive generative learning, appropriate support, and process-oriented evaluation, a learning path should be constructed that encompasses "creating authentic scenarios—effective collaborative organization—stimulating divergent expression—reflective iterative advancement—supportive evaluation optimization," truly embedding creative thinking cultivation into daily kindergarten curriculum and activities.

In general, peer collaboration is not only an organizational form for children to complete tasks together, but also a crucial developmental mechanism for stimulating the collision of ideas, promoting the reorganization of experiences, and driving innovative expression. Inquiry-based learning provides authentic problem carriers and open generative spaces for this interaction. The combination of the two helps to form a creative thinking cultivation model that is more in line with the developmental characteristics of young children. In future educational practice, this path needs further refinement and empirical testing, taking into account different age groups, kindergarten conditions, and activity types, to enhance its applicability, operability, and promotional value.

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