

REFLECTION AS AN INTEGRATIVE ELEMENT IN PRESCHOOL EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

Amalia ENACHE, PhD student

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4606-6016>

“Ion Creangă” State Pedagogical University of Chișinău

Abstract. The article examines the role of reflection in preschool experiential learning by reinterpreting the experiential model proposed by D.A. Kolb. Drawing on the theoretical contributions of J. Dewey, D.A. Kolb, J. Piaget, L.S. Vygotsky, J. Bruner, and D. Schön, reflection is approached not only as a stage of the experiential cycle, but as a transversal, continuous, and integrative process of the child's experience. The article highlights its specific preschool forms and functions in organizing experience, meaning-making, conceptualization, self-regulation, convergence of types of knowledge, value internalization, and the axiological dimension of learning.

Keywords: reflection, experiential learning, preschool education, epistemic convergence, axiological dimension, internalization of values, pedagogical model.

REFLECȚIA CA ELEMENT INTEGRATOR ÎN ÎNVĂȚAREA EXPERIENȚIALĂ PREȘCOLARĂ

Rezumat. Articolul analizează rolul reflecției în învățarea experiențială preșcolară, prin reinterpretarea modelului experiențial propus de D.A. Kolb. Pornind de la contribuțiile teoretice ale lui J. Dewey, D.A. Kolb, J. Piaget, L.S. Vîgotski, J. Bruner și D. Schön, reflecția este abordată nu doar ca etapă a ciclului experiențial, ci ca proces transversal, continuu și integrator al experienței copilului. Sunt evidențiate formele specifice ale reflecției la preșcolari: verbalizări simple, expresie afectivă, joc simbolic și dialog pedagogic mediat, precum și funcțiile acestora în organizarea experienței, construirea sensului, conceptualizare, autoreglare, convergența tipurilor de cunoaștere, internalizarea valorilor și susținerea dimensiunii axiologice a învățării.

Cuvinte-cheie: reflecție, învățare experiențială, educație preșcolară, convergență epistemică, dimensiune axiologică, internalizarea valorilor, model pedagogic.

Introduction

In preschool education, direct experience constitutes one of the most productive sources of learning, because the child comes to know the world through exploration, manipulation, play, communication, and social interaction. Nevertheless, experience does not automatically generate lasting learning. In order for lived activity to become an educational experience, it must be recognized, verbalized, reorganized, and integrated into structures of meaning. In this process, *reflection* mediates between immediate action and the child's personal understanding.

The need for reflection is supported by the pragmatic tradition initiated by John Dewey. In *How We Think*, the author shows that experience becomes a genuine source of learning only when it is investigated, reorganized, and interpreted through reflective thinking [1]. Thus, the educational significance of experience lies not in the simple fact

that it is lived, but in the child's ability to return to it, formulate questions, and discover its meaning with adult support.

Reflection is described as an act of critical analysis that raises questions, provides clarification, and generates understanding. Through dialogue and mediation, the child transforms actions into conceptual knowledge; this is how the well-known cycle of experience-reflection-action emerges. "To reflect upon a thing means to seek additional evidence, new data, that will develop the suggestion and will, as we say, either confirm it or make obvious its absurdity and irrelevance" [1, p. 13]. Experience in itself is not sufficient to produce durable and formative knowledge. Living through a situation, participating in an activity, or observing a phenomenon can acquire educational value only if these lived experiences are consciously, systematically, and critically re-examined.

J. Dewey emphasizes that authentic learning involves an internal reconstruction of lived meaning: the child returns to what he or she has done, asks questions, searches for causal connections, identifies alternatives, and formulates conclusions. In this way, raw experience is transformed into understanding, while understanding becomes a starting point for future intelligent actions. Therefore, reflection is the key element that gives formative value to experiences, transforming them into organized knowledge and a foundation for further development. Dewey considered that "the value of education lies in the individual's capacity to apply what has been learned in new situations" [2, p. 77]. Consequently, transfer represents an authentic validation of learning and an important epistemic criterion.

In relation to early childhood education, this perspective supports the idea that preschool children's reflection is not primarily discursive, but actional, emotional, and symbolic; it is expressed through the repetition of actions, simple verbalizations, role play, or artistic expression, fulfilling the function of assigning value to lived experience. This conception is essential for preschool experiential learning, because it shows that the child's mere participation in practical activities or games does not guarantee learning. What matters is that the child should be encouraged to think, observe, ask questions, and express what he or she has experienced, with adult support.

Methods and materials

The paper has a theoretical-interpretative character and uses conceptual analysis, bibliographic synthesis, and pedagogical modelling. The basic material consists of classical and contemporary theories of experiential learning and reflection, correlated with the developmental characteristics of preschool children. Thus, the concept of educational experience is drawn from J. Dewey [1; 2; 3], reflective observation from D.A. Kolb's cycle [4], the stages of cognitive development from J. Piaget and B. Inhelder

[5], mediation and internalization from L.S. Vygotsky [6], and reflection as a return to experience from D.A. Schön's work [7].

Methodologically, the analysis followed three levels. The first is the epistemological level, which clarifies the relationship between experience, knowledge, and meaning, in accordance with D.A. Kolb's statement that "learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" [4, p. 38]. The second is the psycho-pedagogical level, which examines the forms of reflection accessible to preschool children in relation to the stages of cognitive development described by Piaget and Inhelder [5] and to the zone of proximal development formulated by Vygotsky as the distance between the current level of development and the possible level achieved with adult support [6]. The third is the practical-applied level, which describes the educator's interventions through exploration, dialogue, play, and active, iconic, and symbolic representations, in line with Bruner's perspective on instruction [8].

The proposed pedagogical modelling is based on adapting D.A. Kolb's cycle to preschool age. In its classical form, the cycle includes "concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation" [4, pp. 30-42]. In early childhood education, these stages do not appear as independent formal-logical operations, but as sensory, affective, symbolic, and verbal manifestations supported by the educator. For this reason, reflection is analysed both as a stage of the cycle and as a continuous mechanism that traverses all moments of experience.

Results and discussion

The epistemological vision formulated by D.A. Kolb in his theory of experiential learning emphasizes the dynamic process of knowledge construction, in which the individual is not a simple receiver of information, but an active agent who transforms concrete experiences into conceptual understanding. This perspective places learning at the centre of the process of knowing, treating it as "a process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" [4, p. 38].

D.A. Kolb's theory of experiential learning was not originally designed for the preschool stage, yet its epistemological principles can be effectively adapted to support the cognitive, emotional, and social development of young children. In order to identify ways of adapting the four stages of the experiential learning cycle (concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation), this structural model is transposed into the synthesis table 1.

Preschool children do not yet operate effectively with abstract concepts. According to D.A. Kolb, authentic learning is a process of adaptation [4], and at this age adaptation occurs predominantly through the senses and through action. Therefore, preschool education must provide manipulable and varied materials, multisensory experiences, and

dynamic learning environments. Although systematic reflection is limited at this age, dialogue with the adult can play a role of reflective mediation, similar to reflective observation in Kolb's model. Through open-ended questions, the educator supports the child in understanding and expressing what he or she has experienced.

Table 1. Adaptation of the four stages of the experiential learning cycle to preschool education

Stages according to D.A. Kolb	Preschool equivalent	Adapted example
1. <i>Concrete experience</i>	Direct living of a sensory situation	The child models plasticine, plays with water, and touches different materials.
2. <i>Reflective observation</i>	Guided dialogue about what the child experienced	The educator asks: "How did it feel when you touched the cold cube?"
3. <i>Abstract conceptualization</i>	Simplified labelling and explanation	The educator formulates: "This is ice. It is cold and wet."
4. <i>Active experimentation</i>	Application in other play contexts	The child tries to pour water over the ice and observes what happens.

Figure 1 illustrates the adaptation of the experiential learning cycle proposed by D.A. Kolb to the specificity of cognitive development in the preschool period.

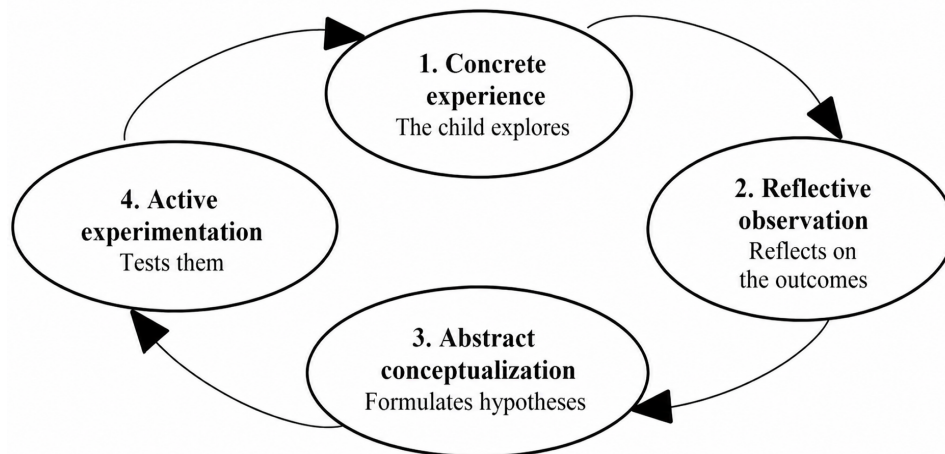


Figure 1. The experiential learning cycle in preschool children: an approach inspired by D.A. Kolb

Each stage of the model is reformulated in order to reflect behaviours and processes characteristic of early age: the child actively explores the environment (concrete experience), reflects spontaneously or with guidance on the results (reflective observation), begins to formulate intuitive explanations or hypotheses (abstract conceptualization), and verifies them through new actions (active experimentation). This adaptation respects the principle according to which preschool learning is a circular, dynamic, and integrated process, in which thinking develops from direct interaction with the surrounding world, through action, reflection, and expression. The model supports the

construction of early knowledge as a natural process deeply anchored in the child's personal experience.

In the experiential learning model proposed by D.A. Kolb, reflection occupies the position of the second stage of the cycle, namely *Reflective Observation*, and is placed immediately after concrete experience. In this logic, reflection functions as a link between the direct living of experience and the subsequent processes of conceptualization and application. Without reflection, experience remains an isolated event, and the experiential cycle cannot be completed as an authentic learning process.

D.A. Kolb explicitly emphasizes that the stage of reflective observation presupposes a temporary suspension of action and a deliberate return to what has been lived, stating that “reflective observation involves carefully examining experience from different perspectives” [4, p. 42]. Through reflection, the subject analyses what happened, identifies relationships and regularities, and begins to extract meanings from lived experience. This stage is essential because, in its absence, “experience is not sufficient in itself to produce learning” [4, p. 40].

Although Kolb's model places reflection in the form of *reflective observation* (RO) as the second stage, an analysis of preschool development requires moving beyond a rigid staged interpretation. In the context of early childhood education, reflection cannot be located exclusively between concrete experience and conceptualization, because the child's cognitive, affective, and actional processes are profoundly interconnected and continuously influence one another. The positioning of reflection as a continuous integrative process is justified by several theoretical and psycho-pedagogical arguments:

- First, reflection appears within the experience, not only after it: the child adjusts action in real time, reacts emotionally, anticipates, and corrects spontaneously, which indicates the presence of an operative, diffuse, and permanent form of reflection.
- Second, reflection extends over conceptualization and active experimentation, influencing the way in which the child stabilizes meaning and validates experience through action.

In this logic, reflection can no longer be treated as a distinct “moment” of the experiential cycle, but as the functional core of the entire learning dynamic, traversing and structuring all stages. This repositioning is essential for preschool age, where thinking is largely actional, symbolic, and affective, and where reflection appears as an emergent process rather than as deliberate analysis.

In the preschool context, reflective observation does not take the form of the elaborate verbal analysis described in adults, but appears through forms adapted to the child's developmental level: guided recall, expression of emotions, simple description of actions, and symbolic re-enactment of experience through play or drawing. This

adaptation is compatible with D.A. Kolb's statement that reflection can take different forms, since "effective learning requires the ability to reflect on experience and give it meaning" [4, p. 194]. Thus, reflection becomes the epistemological space in which the child begins to connect experience with understanding, preparing the transition toward generalization and subsequent application.

A fundamental principle of experiential learning is the processing of experience through reflection, because experience does not automatically become formative, but only through the subject's relation to his or her own lived experiences and actions. Psycho-pedagogically, reflection is defined as "the fundamental capacity of the subject's consciousness to relate practically to its own consciousness" [9, p. 16], a definition that highlights its internalizing, self-regulating, and formative character. In relation to preschool age, this perspective explains how the child begins to become aware of lived experiences, differentiate them affectively, and progressively organize them into an emerging structure of meaning.

From this perspective, reflection cannot be reduced either to a simple recollection of experience or to a punctual cognitive analysis; rather, it must be understood as a dynamic process of awareness, interpretation, evaluation, and relation to oneself and to the world, through which experience acquires personal significance and formative value:

- *Awareness* represents the first level of emergent reflection and presupposes the recognition of experience as a distinct event, lived affectively and bodily ("I did it", "I liked it", "it was difficult"). This awareness is not conceptual, but situated and affective, being supported by emerging language, gesture, facial expression, and emotional expression.
- *Interpretation* appears as the process through which the child begins to establish simple meaning relations between action, result, and emotion, even when these are not explicitly verbalized.
- *Evaluation* appears implicitly as a differentiation between successful and unsuccessful, pleasant and unpleasant, easy and difficult.
- *Relation to oneself and to the world* marks the beginning of the internalization of experience through its integration into the child's personal structure.

This dynamic confirms that reflection is not an act exterior to experience, but the mechanism through which experience is recognized, interpreted, and assimilated, becoming part of the construction of the self in relation to reality. This extended and recurrent structure is graphically represented in the integrated conical model (figure 2).

In the proposed structural model, reflection fulfils several essential functions that explain its structuring role within the experiential cycle:

a) *The function of integrating experience.* Reflection brings together the disparate elements of experience - action, emotion, and result - into a coherent structure of

understanding. Kolb shows that reflective observation involves the “careful examination of experience from different perspectives” [4, p. 42]. In preschool age, this function appears when the child briefly describes what he or she did, how he or she felt, and what happened, achieving an initial convergence of sensory, emotional, and cognitive knowledge.

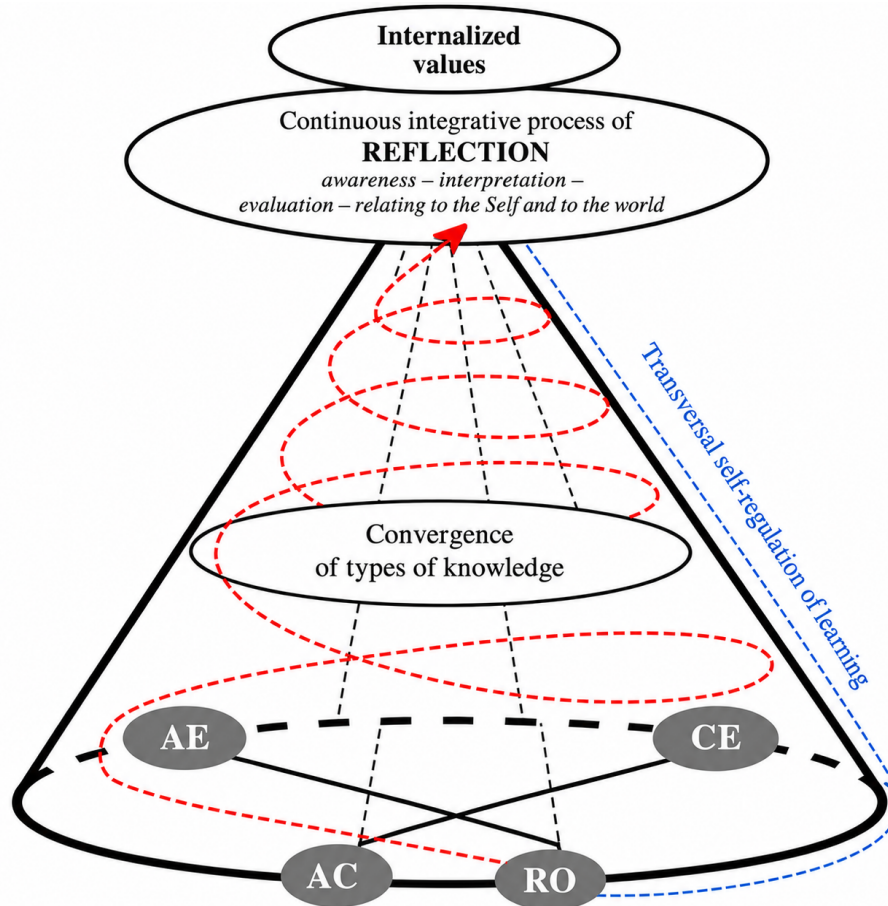


Figure 2. Reflection as a continuous integrative element of preschool experiential learning

b) *The function of meaning-making.* A fundamental function of reflection is to confer meaning upon lived experience. D.A. Kolb emphasizes that experience in itself is not sufficient for learning, because “experience must be reflected upon in order to become a source of learning” [4, p. 40]. In preschool children, meaning is lived and expressed affectively through distinctions such as pleasant/unpleasant, easy/difficult, or successful/unsuccessful. Thus, reflection transforms experience into a formative process that supports motivation, interest, and further involvement in learning.

c) *The function of preparing conceptualization.* Reflection creates the premises for abstract conceptualization, the next stage of Kolb’s cycle. Kolb states that reflective observation allows the identification of regularities and relationships, later organized into concepts [4]. In preschool children, this process appears through intuitive generalizations, such as: “it always falls”, “this is how it is done”, or “next time I can do it differently”.

Thus, reflection functions as a bridge between concrete experience and emerging cognitive structures.

d) *The function of self-regulation.* Another important function of reflection is to support behavioural and cognitive self-regulation. D.A. Kolb highlights that reflection allows the subject to analyse his or her actions and adjust behaviour in future situations, orienting learning toward more effective action [4]. In the case of preschool children, this self-regulation is manifested through the child's ability to observe what worked and what did not, to spontaneously correct the strategies used, and to anticipate the consequences of his or her actions. Thus, reflection contributes not only to the accumulation of experience, but also to the *development of autonomy and initiative in learning*, an essential aspect for the effectiveness of the experiential model.

The functional extension of reflection beyond reflective observation (RO) makes it possible to explain the genesis of meaning in preschool experiential learning. Reflection does not merely return to experience; it mediates the transition from divergence to convergence, organizing the plurality of lived experiences into a coherent structure of meaning. In the phase of concrete experience, the child is situated in a space of experiential divergence, characterized by exploration and sensory, emotional, and playful variety.

Reflection intervenes as *a process of selection and organization*, facilitating convergence through the establishment of meaningful relationships among the elements of experience. In this context, the stage of *conceptualization* (AC) does not represent formal abstraction, but rather a zone of meaning stabilization, while *active experimentation* (AE) becomes a space for its validation and consolidation. Therefore, the functional extension of reflection over AC and AE explains how meaning does not appear spontaneously, but is progressively constructed through repetition, reorganization, and practical validation. This perspective theoretically grounds the correlation between D.A. Kolb's model and divergent-convergent processes, justifying the reinterpretation of the experiential cycle.

We reinterpret *reflective observation* (RO) in Kolb's model because we consider that it should not be reduced to a simple analysis of experience, but should be conceived as the triggering moment of the convergence of types of knowledge. RO marks the transition from fragmentary living to the internal organization of experience, activating mechanisms through which knowledge establishes correlations at sensory, emotional, symbolic, and cognitive levels. If RO represents reflective observation presented as a fixed stage, then extended reflection is *a transversal and recurrent process* that integrates experience, conceptualization, and action, leading to the emergence of internalized values. This triggering function explains why reflection is not exhausted in RO, but propagates transversally over conceptualization and active experimentation. Reflection

thus becomes the process through which experience is continuously questioned, reorganized, and validated, while meaning is progressively refined. This approach goes beyond the classical reading of Kolb's model and introduces a dynamic and integrative vision adapted to the specificity of early childhood education.

Reflection functions as a space of convergence for types of knowledge, each being valued through a specific function: empirical knowledge is interpreted through the relationships established between action, result, and consequences; artistic knowledge is signified through expressive and symbolic experiences; religious knowledge is internalized through emotional and ritual experiences that become early axiological landmarks; and scientific knowledge is structured through the intuitive ordering of observed regularities. Through this integrative function, reflection ensures the epistemic convergence of experience, transforming different forms of knowledge into a unitary, stable, and transferable meaning with formative value for the preschool child.

At the end point of the experiential learning process, continuous reflection leads to *the emergence of internalized values*, understood as stabilized structures of meaning that orient the child's attitudes, choices, and behaviours. Internalized values are neither transmitted directly nor imposed from the outside; they result from meaningful learning, in which experience is lived, reflected upon, organized, and validated through action. The introduction of the concept of axiological horizon makes it possible to describe this dimension as an emergent result of the convergence of types of knowledge and of integrative reflection. The axiological horizon represents the child's internal frame of reference in relation to the world, constituted progressively through reflected experiences that acquire personal and formative value. From this perspective, values are not external aims of education, but expressions of constructed meaning, situated at the top of the experiential dynamic, as represented in the conical model.

Therefore, in the model adapted from D.A. Kolb, reflection fulfils functions of integration, signification, conceptualization, and self-regulation, transforming the preschool child's immediate lived experience into a meaningful, stable, and transferable experience.

Conclusions

Reflection constitutes a central mechanism of preschool experiential learning because it transforms immediate lived activity into experience with educational meaning. At this age, reflection is manifested through simple verbalizations, affective reactions, symbolic play, drawing, repetition of action, and dialogue with the adult. The formative value of experience does not reside in the child's mere participation in an activity, but in the possibility of becoming aware of, expressing, and reorganizing what has been lived through pedagogical mediation adapted to early development.

The study proposes a reinterpretation of reflection within D.A. Kolb's experiential model, not merely as a distinct stage of the cycle, but as a transversal, continuous, and integrative process. This approach is relevant to preschool education because it corresponds to the syncretic, affective, and actional character of child development, in which cognitive, emotional, and behavioural processes function interdependently. Reflection traverses concrete experience, conceptualization, and active experimentation, supporting the progressive organization and validation of meaning.

By extending reflection functionally beyond reflective observation, the article highlights its role in epistemic convergence, the internalization of values, and support for the axiological dimension of learning. The proposed pedagogical model valorizes the specificity of preschool education through exploration, dialogue, symbolic expression, and guided reflection, transforming the child's experience into an authentic process of constructing meaning, knowledge, and values.

References

1. DEWEY, J. *How We Think*. Boston: D.C. Heath & Co., 1910. 224 p.
2. DEWEY, J. *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education*. New York: Macmillan, 1916. 434 p.
3. DEWEY, J. *Experience and Education*. New York: Macmillan, 1938. 116 p.
4. KOLB, D. A. *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1984. 256 p. ISBN 0-13-295261-0.
5. PIAGET, J.; INHELDER, B. *The Psychology of the Child*. New York: Basic Books, 1969. 173 p. ISBN 0-465-06735-2.
6. VYGOTSKY, L. S. *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978. 159 p. ISBN 0-674-57629-2.
7. SCHÖN, D. A. *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action*. New York: Basic Books, 1983. 374 p. ISBN 0-465-06878-2.
8. BRUNER, J. S. *Toward a Theory of Instruction*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1966. 176 p. ISBN 0-674-89701-3.
9. MORARI, M. Reflexiunea artistică ca element al culturii muzicale a elevilor. În: *Didactica Pro*. Revistă de teorie și practică educațională, 2014, nr. 1 (83), pp. 15–18. ISSN 1810-6455.

Received / *Recepționat*: 24.05.2026

Accepted / *Acceptat*: 29.06.2026

Email: amaliaenache3176@gmail.com