RADIX International Journal of Foundational Learning
https://journal.synrise.org/index.php/radix

e-ISSN : XXXX-XXX
Vol 1, Issue 1, 2026
pp. 25-31

Theoretical Explorations of Embodied Cognition in Primary School Digital Learning Environments

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Article Info

Article history:

Received: 14-12-2025
Revised: 07-01-2026
Accepted: 22-01-2026

Keywords:

Embodied cognition, Digital learning environments, Primary school, Learning theory, Instructional design

ABSTRACT

The rapid integration of digital learning environments (DLEs) in primary education necessitates robust theoretical frameworks to guide their design and implementation. While traditional cognitive approaches have dominated, they often overlook the fundamental role of the body and sensory-motor experiences in learning. This paper presents a theoretical exploration of embodied cognition as a transformative paradigm for primary school DLEs. Through a conceptual analysis method, we examine core principles of embodied cognition—such as the constitutive role of sensorimotor engagement, the offloading of cognitive load onto the environment, and the creation of simulated experiences—and their direct implications for learning design. Our findings propose that DLEs which intentionally incorporate physical movement, gestural interaction, and spatially-aware technologies can foster deeper conceptual understanding and engagement among young learners. We argue for a shift from purely symbolic, screen-based interactions to designs that leverage the body's capacity for meaning-making. The study culminates in a preliminary theoretical framework for embodied DLE design, addressing the identified gap between theory and practice. This exploration underscores the potential of embodied cognition to enhance the efficacy and developmental appropriateness of digital learning tools in primary education, suggesting a new trajectory for research and development in educational technology.

1. INTRODUCTION

The global educational landscape is witnessing an unprecedented proliferation of digital learning environments (DLEs) at the primary school level, a trend accelerated by technological advancements and amplified by the global shift towards blended learning models (Zheng et al., 2023). These environments, ranging from simple educational apps to complex virtual platforms, promise to enhance accessibility, personalization, and engagement. However, a critical examination reveals that many of these tools are built upon a foundation of traditional cognitive theories, which often conceptualize the mind as an abstract information-processing system, largely decoupled from the physical body and its sensorimotor interactions with the world (Shapiro, 2019). This "disembodied" approach risks creating learning experiences that are passive and symbolically dense, potentially failing to align with the developmental needs of young children who inherently learn through touch, movement, and direct interaction with their environment (Skulmowski & Rey, 2020; Ackerman, 2018).

How to cite: Nakolas, V., Pantongruk, P., & Fachrin, M. (2026). Theoretical Explorations of Embodied Cognition in Primary School Digital Learning Environments. *Radix: International Journal Foundational Learning*, *1*(1), xx–xx. https://doi.org/10.55681/radix.v1i1.13

In response to these limitations, the paradigm of embodied cognition has emerged as a powerful alternative framework within the cognitive sciences. This perspective posits that cognition is not a process that happens *in the brain* alone, but rather one that is fundamentally shaped *by the body* and its continuous, dynamic engagement with the surrounding world (Wilson & Foglia, 2017). The core tenets of embodied cognition—encapsulated in the "4Es": *embodied, embedded, enacted,* and *affective*—argue that the mind is inseparable from the physical form it inhabits, is situated within a specific context, is brought forth through action, and is deeply intertwined with emotional states (Varela et al., 2016; Newen et al., 2018). This view challenges the long-held Cartesian dualism, suggesting instead that even our most abstract reasoning is grounded in sensorimotor experiences (Glenberg, 2010; Lakoff & Johnson, 1999).

Despite its profound implications for understanding how children learn, a significant chasm persists between the theoretical richness of embodied cognition and its practical application in the design of DLEs for primary education (Johnson-Glenberg, 2018). Many educational technologies, while digitally sophisticated, remain confined to two-dimensional screens, relying on click-and-drag interactions that offer limited scope for genuine bodily engagement (Malinverni & Pares, 2014). This gap represents a missed opportunity to create digital tools that resonate with the embodied nature of childhood development, where physical play and manipulation are central to constructing knowledge (Pfeifer & Bongard, 2006; Thelen & Smith, 1994).

Therefore, this paper aims to conduct a comprehensive theoretical exploration to bridge this gap. The specific objectives are threefold: (1) To systematically analyze and synthesize the key principles of embodied cognition that hold the greatest relevance for primary school learning; (2) To extrapolate from these principles a set of concrete, theoretically-grounded implications for the design of DLEs, including interface, interaction, and content design; and (3) To construct a preliminary conceptual framework that can guide developers, educators, and researchers in creating and evaluating embodied DLEs. This exploration is guided by the central research question: "How can the principles of embodied cognition theory be systematically operationalized to inform the design of effective, engaging, and developmentally appropriate digital learning environments for primary school students?

2. METHODS

2.1. Research Design

This research was designed as a theoretical study or conceptual analysis (Wohlfart et al., 2021). Unlike empirical research that collects and analyzes primary data, this type of study focuses on constructing and developing a framework of thought through an in-depth analysis of established concepts and theories (Jabareen, 2009).

2.2. Data Sources

The primary data sources for this analysis were academic literature comprising two clusters. The first cluster consisted of foundational and contemporary works in the field of embodied cognition and cognitive science (e.g., Varela et al., 2016; Shapiro, 2019; Wilson & Foglia, 2017). The second cluster was empirical research and literature reviews in the field of educational technology, particularly those focusing on digital learning for children and human-computer interaction design for education (e.g., Skulmowski & Rey, 2020; Johnson-Glenberg, 2018; Zheng et al., 2023).

2.3. Analysis Procedure

The analysis procedure followed the conceptual analysis model proposed by Jabareen (2009), which involves several iterative phases: (1) Critical reading and deconstruction of related literature to identify main conceptual categories; (2) Finding and grouping interrelated themes from these categories; (3) Analyzing the relationships between themes to build a coherent network of meaning; and (4) Synthesizing this network of meaning into an integrated conceptual framework that answers the research question. This process allowed for a systematic and deep understanding of a broad and multidisciplinary body of literature.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Foundational Principles of Embodied Cognition for Primary Education

The theoretical exploration identified several core principles of embodied cognition that hold particular significance for primary school digital learning contexts. The principle of grounded and simulated cognition establishes that cognitive representations are fundamentally built upon the reactivation of modality-specific systems for perception and action (Barsalou, 2008). When a child learns about a concept like "roundness," for instance, the understanding involves mental simulation of experiences involving holding, throwing, or seeing round objects rather than merely processing abstract symbols (Glenberg, 2010). This principle suggests that digital learning environments must be designed to activate these sensorimotor simulations through appropriate representations and interactions.

Another crucial principle involves cognitive offloading and environmental scaffolding, which describes how cognition intelligently utilizes the environment to reduce working memory load (Wilson, 2002). Children naturally employ this strategy when they use their fingers for counting or manipulate physical objects to solve problems. In digital environments, the interface itself can serve as an extension of the mind, allowing children to offload cognitive work onto the digital tools. For example, a geometry application that enables dynamic manipulation of shapes allows students to visually explore geometric properties, thereby externalizing cognitive processes that would otherwise remain internal and abstract (Sinclair & de Freitas, 2019).

The principle of enaction emphasizes that knowledge is not pre-existing but is brought forth through the learner's active, perceptually guided engagement with their environment (Varela et al., 2016). From this perspective, learning becomes a process of "guided doing" where understanding emerges from the interaction between the learner and their learning context (Abrahamson & Lindgren, 2014). This is particularly relevant for primary education, where children's natural inclination to learn through physical interaction with their world should be leveraged rather than suppressed in digital learning designs.

3.2. Design Implications for Digital Learning Environments

The translation of these embodied principles into practical design implications necessitates a fundamental rethinking of how digital learning environments are conceived and implemented. The design of body-environment interfaces must expand beyond traditional mouse and keyboard interactions to incorporate a wider spectrum of bodily engagement. Technologies such as touchscreens, motion-sensing cameras, and devices equipped with inertial sensors enable interactions through pointing, jumping, tilting, and gesturing, allowing for more natural and embodied forms of engagement (Malinverni & Pares, 2014).

Within this expanded interaction paradigm, physical movement should be reconceptualized not as a distraction but as an integral component of the cognitive process itself. Research has demonstrated that gestural movement can significantly facilitate mathematical problem-solving and narrative comprehension (Alibali & Nathan, 2018). In digital learning environments, pedagogically guided movements—such as using arm positions to represent angles in geometry or bodily movements to demonstrate scientific concepts—can create powerful learning experiences that connect abstract concepts to physical experiences (Kontra et al., 2012).

Immersive technologies like augmented reality offer particularly promising avenues for implementing embodied learning principles. By superimposing digital information onto the real physical world, augmented reality creates learning experiences that are simultaneously embedded in both digital and physical contexts (Johnson-Glenberg, 2018). A student using augmented reality can manipulate virtual objects in their actual physical space, observing scientific processes unfold on their desk or exploring historical artifacts in their classroom. This seamless integration of digital and physical realms creates powerful situated learning experiences that align with how children naturally interact with and understand their world (Bacca et al., 2014).

3.3. Theoretical Integration with Constructivist Learning Traditions

Embodied cognition theory demonstrates strong theoretical resonance with constructivist traditions in education, particularly Piagetian constructivism and Papert's constructionism. The Piagetian emphasis on logical-mathematical knowledge developing from children's physical actions upon objects finds robust support in the mechanisms described by embodied cognition (Ackermann, 2007). Embodied cognition provides a detailed explanatory framework for how physical actions form the foundation for mental schemas, offering cognitive scientific validation for constructivist claims about the importance of physical interaction in learning (Lindgren & Johnson-Glenberg, 2013).

In digital contexts, this theoretical integration suggests that digital learning environments should function as "objects to think with," where digital manipulation preserves the experiential qualities of physical manipulation. The synthesis of constructionism and embodied cognition creates an educational paradigm where students not only construct mental knowledge internally but also physically enact their understanding through meaningful interaction with both real and digital environments (Abrahamson & Lindgren, 2014). This integrated perspective emphasizes that learning involves both mental construction and physical embodiment of understanding.

3.4. Implementation Challenges and a Proposed Theoretical Framework

The implementation of embodied design principles faces several significant challenges. Practical and logistical hurdles include the cost and technical reliability of sensing devices in school environments, along with the physical space requirements for full-body interaction (Skulmowski & Rey, 2020). Pedagogical challenges involve the effective integration of embodied activities into curriculum goals, ensuring that physical engagement serves genuine learning objectives rather than functioning as mere entertainment (Alibali & Nathan, 2018). Additionally, the development of appropriate assessment methods that can capture the learning outcomes of embodied interactions presents a substantial challenge for researchers and educators (Danish et al., 2020).

As a synthesis of this theoretical exploration, we propose a comprehensive framework for embodied cognition-based design in primary school digital learning environments. This framework centers on three interconnected pillars: perceptual grounding, meaningful action, and ecological embedding. The first pillar, perceptual grounding, focuses on designing digital environments that activate relevant sensory modalities to build rich mental simulations, utilizing dynamic visualizations and multisensory feedback to create experientially grounded learning experiences (Barsalou, 2008). The second pillar, meaningful action, emphasizes the importance of designing interactions that involve physical actions which analogically or metaphorically map onto the concepts being learned, ensuring that bodily engagement directly supports conceptual understanding (Black, 2010). The third pillar, ecological embedding, addresses the need to situate learning activities within coherent physical and social contexts, using technologies like augmented reality to create learning experiences that are personally and socially meaningful (Hutchins, 1995).

This integrated framework suggests that effective embodied digital learning environments are those that successfully incorporate all three pillars, creating a virtuous cycle where perception guides action, action transforms the digital environment, and the embedded context gives personal meaning to the entire learning process. The framework provides a theoretical foundation for future development and research in embodied learning technologies.

4. CONCLUSION

This theoretical exploration has established that embodied cognition provides a vital and transformative framework for reconceptualizing the design of digital learning environments in primary education. By recognizing that cognition is fundamentally grounded in the body's interactions with the world, we can move beyond the limitations of disembodied, symbol-processing models of learning. The analysis has demonstrated that principles such as simulation, offloading, and enaction have direct and powerful implications for how we design digital interfaces, interactions, and content representations.

The proposed framework, centered on perceptual grounding, meaningful action, and ecological embedding, offers a concrete pathway for translating theoretical principles into practical design strategies. It advocates for digital learning environments that are not merely consumed through screens but are physically inhabited and acted upon, transforming abstract concepts into tangible experiences that resonate with children's natural modes of learning.

To translate this theoretical potential into practical reality, we suggest several directions for future work. For researchers, we recommend prioritizing rigorous empirical studies that test the hypotheses generated by this framework, including classroom-based research that documents implementation challenges and learning outcomes across diverse student populations. For content developers and policymakers, we suggest adopting embodied design principles as key criteria in the development and selection of educational technology, fostering interdisciplinary collaborations that bring together cognitive scientists, learning designers, and educators from the earliest stages of product development. For teacher education programs, we recommend integrating principles of embodied cognition into professional development, equipping educators with the knowledge and skills to effectively implement and assess embodied digital learning strategies within their curricula.

By embracing the embodied nature of the young mind, we can harness the power of digital technology to create learning environments that are not only more effective but also more engaging, developmentally appropriate, and aligned with how children naturally explore and understand their world.

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