

Theoretical Foundations of Early Childhood Education: A Comparative Analysis of Classical and Modern Philosophies in the Context of the Mongolian Early Childhood Education Curriculum

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Early childhood education (ECE) plays a fundamental role in shaping young children's cognitive, social, and emotional development. This study explores the theoretical foundations of ECE by analyzing classical and modern philosophical perspectives and their impact on early childhood curriculum development, particularly in Mongolia. The research examines the key intellectual contributions of thinkers such as Plato, Rousseau, Pestalozzi, and Comenius, comparing them with contemporary theories from Piaget, Vygotsky, Erikson, and Bruner. Through this comparative analysis, the study identifies enduring principles that continue to influence modern ECE programs, including child-centered learning, holistic development, and the roles of educators and caregivers. Furthermore, the study evaluates how these foundational philosophies shape Mongolia's childhood education curriculum, aligning traditional educational values with global pedagogical trends. The findings highlight the significance of integrating classical and modern theories to create a comprehensive and culturally relevant ECE framework. By synthesizing historical insights with contemporary practices, this study contributes to the ongoing discourse on optimizing early childhood education policies and curricula for children's holistic development in a rapidly evolving educational landscape.

Keywords: early childhood education, educational philosophy, curriculum development, child-centered learning, Mongolia

Introduction

Improving the quality of life of young children has become a priority international objective, supported by research, policy initiatives, program development, and implementation (UNESCO, 2006). Children are the future of a country. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization has identified four perspectives that determine the political, economic, and socio-cultural state of a country's development from the perspective of childhood. These are:

- (1) Developmental perspective—the perspective that considers childhood the most vulnerable period

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in terms of physical, mental, and social development, interdependence, and the foundation for human development.

(2) Political and economic perspective—the perspective that emphasizes the impact of education and social participation on childhood, as it is the next foundational period of society and the first period of human development.

(3) Social and cultural perspective—the perspective of children and respect for children’s personal and cultural differences in the methods and practices used to implement young children’s goals, content, and education standards.

(4) A human rights perspective—this perspective changes the traditional framework of theory and research policy and recognizes the uniqueness of young children, their development, and their contribution to that development (UNESCO, 2006).

Early childhood education programs should embody these objectives of enhancing the quality of life for young children. Consequently, this paper examines the philosophical foundations of early childhood education and its global implementation through six dimensions.

Philosophy of Early Childhood Education

The philosophy of early childhood education has a long history and can be divided into the following two periods: (1) Classical philosophy and ideas; (2) Modern philosophy and ideas of early childhood education.

Classical Philosophy and Ideas

We have included the period from the Greek classical philosopher Plato to the British social reformer Robert Owen in this period. We have compared the views of the philosophers of this period in six areas: (i) characteristics of early childhood, (ii) role of teachers, (iii) role of parents and guardians, (iv) characteristics of early childhood learning, (v) content and methodology of early childhood education programs, and (vi) state and community participation.

Characteristics of childhood. Plato and Jean-Jacques Rousseau proposed that childhood is a critical period for forming human intelligence and character, which develops naturally and changes under the influence of the environment (Scolnicov, 1988; Summers, 2019; Philosophy Terms, 2023).

The role of the teacher. We have seen that the definition of the role of the teacher in the classical concept of early childhood education has become the basis for the idea adopted in modern times. These include Plato, who said, “The teacher’s role is to direct the child’s interests and pleasures through play to the ultimate goal of life” (Novak Djokovic Foundation, 2018); Aristotle, “observing children an understanding their innate tendencies and behaviors” (Novak Djokovic Foundation, 2018); M. F. Quintilian, “Children learn successfully only when they are guided without coercion, patience, and understanding” (Mukhsen, 2022), and I.G. Pestalozzi, “the teacher’s role is not to teach, but to model and guide, and to recognize the unique needs and capabilities of each child, and teachers should adapt their methods to the characteristics of the learner” (Novak Djokovic Foundation, 2018).

The role of parents and guardians. The idea that mothers and parents are the first teachers of children was put forward by the German educator Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi (Philosophy Terms, 2023) and the Roman poet Marcus Fabius Quintilian (Philosophy Terms, 2023; Novak Djokovic Foundation, 2018), who also emphasized the importance of choosing your child’s teacher very carefully.

Characteristics of early childhood learning. Fabius Quintilian believed early childhood learning should “focus on nurturing the child’s natural curiosity and desire to learn,” while J. J. Rousseau believed that “children should be encouraged to develop their strengths in an environment free from interference and restrictions,” and I. G. Pestalozzi believed that “learning should follow the child’s natural nature” (Farquhar & White, 2014).

Content and methodology of early childhood education programs. The fact that philosophers and theologians in the 10th century BC proposed concepts for guiding the development and learning of young children indicates that the content and methodology of programs have been the focus of attention of scholars and philosophers throughout the ages. Aristotle, J. A. Comenius, and J. J. Rousseau proposed the idea of having a good quality while the content of the program should include music, poetry, gymnastics, and art to fully develop the child’s potential (Summers, 2019), intelligence and positive character should be cultivated from an early age, and the foundation for ethical and rational behavior in adulthood should be laid, children should acquire skills such as reading, writing, and mathematics to prepare for adulthood (Fossheim, 2017), the main task of education is to teach children to read (Harran, 2004), focusing on developing skills and knowledge that are useful in everyday life and providing learning through practice (Gianoutsos, 2006), and early childhood education should be child-centered, supporting the development of children’s character and morality, cultivating creative thinking, and nurturing social responsibility, cooperation, and the values of a shared life”, according to the Roman philosopher R. Owen (Farquhar & White, 2014). J. J. Rousseau, on the other hand, believed that “delaying formal education until the age of 12, allowing children to develop physically and emotionally before entering academic subjects, will lead to more mature ‘self-directed individuals’” (Tobin, 2005).

Regarding the methodology of working with young children, J. A. Comenius stated that “Sensation is the primary way children acquire information, so all educational activities should be related to the senses.” He also believed that children learn best through participation in activities, being child-centered, playing, exploring, and actively participating in their environment. He created the first picture book because he believed that picture books were used in teaching and that pictures allowed children to acquire names and concepts of objects (Norlin, 2020). I. G. Pestalozzi stated, “Early childhood education is based on the senses. Emphasizing the importance of learning through direct experience and interaction with the environment rather than memorization” (Tobin, 2005).

Government and community involvement. R. Owen saw the need for a nursery school for children up to 10 years of age as the highest interest of society. I. G. Pestalozzi saw the need for training parents and teachers on how best to support children’s development. At the same time, Martin Luther emphasized “the establishment of church schools where all children could receive education, especially in reading and writing, and the provision of necessary support to parents” (Harran, 2004). Conversely, Plato believed the state should supervise and guide children’s education (The Gale Group, Inc., 1988).

Classical philosophers’ ideas include considering the child’s personality, holistic development, and equal inclusion as the basis for education.

The following table shows that the ideas that form the basis of our program concepts and theories today were also mentioned in the pre-Christian era.

Table 1

Classical Philosophers and Their Concepts

Philosophers	Concept	Modern concept
Plato	Childhood is a critical period for developing a person's mind and character. Teacher's Guide. To fully develop a child's potential, music, poetry, gymnastics, and art content should be included.	The golden age of early childhood development. Child-centered learning. Holistic development concept.
Aristotle	The teacher should observe the child and understand their natural tendencies and behaviors. From an early age, intelligence and positive character should be cultivated, laying the foundation for ethical and rational behavior in adulthood. Children should acquire reading, writing, and mathematics skills for adulthood.	Child-centered learning. Holistic development concept.
M. F. Quintilian	The teacher should be patient, understanding, and non-coercive. Parents are the child's first teacher Cultivate the child's natural curiosity and desire to learn.	Child-centered learning. Parental involvement is essential. Child-centered learning.
John Locke	Focus on developing skills and knowledge that are useful in everyday life and provide learning through practice and activities.	The concept of holistic development.
Jean Jacques Rousseau	Encourage children to develop their strengths in an environment without interference and restrictions. Giving children the opportunity to develop physically and emotionally before engaging in academics will lead to more mature, self-directed individuals.	Child-centered learning. Holistic development concept.
I. G. Pestalozzi	A teacher does not teach but models and guides. A teacher recognizes each child's unique needs and abilities and adapts their approach to their characteristics. A mother is a child's first teacher. Learning follows the innate nature of the child. Early childhood education is based on the senses. Learning is about engaging and interacting with the environment rather than memorizing.	Child-centered learning. Respect and consider the individuality of each child. Parental involvement is essential. Child-centered learning. Holistic development concept.
Martin Luther	The main task of education is to teach children to read.	Holistic development concept.
J. A. Comenius	Sensory is a child's primary way of acquiring information, and children play, explore, and actively participate in their environment. Using picture books to teach pictures allows children to acquire names and concepts of objects.	Holistic development concept Literacy Education.
R. Owen	Support children's character and moral development and foster creative thinking. It should be child-centered, fostering social responsibility, cooperation, and shared life values.	Holistic development concept. Holistic development concept.

Modern Early Childhood Education Philosophy

We can consider the philosophical ideas of modern early childhood education in several stages. These include:

- The period of the emergence and development of kindergarten;
- The period of child studies;
- The period of the development of children.

Table 2

Prominent Representatives of Modern Early Childhood Education Philosophy

The period when kindergartens were established and developed	Pediatric period	Stages of child development
Froebel	G. S. Hall	E. Thorndike
Blow	A. Gesell	J. Watson
Pratt	Jean Piaget	Z. Freud
Maria Montessori	Lev Vygotsky	E. Erikson
	Jerome Bruner	J. Bowlby

Let's group these scholars by theoretical orientation and philosophical ideas.

Table 3

Theoretical Trends, Philosophers, and Ideas

Theoretical direction	Theorists	Concept	Opportunities for implementation in the early childhood education program.
Developmental theory	G. S. Hall A. Gesell	Development is the manifestation of traits determined by heredity.	Readiness Activities appropriate to the level of development and characteristics.
Constructivist theory	Jean Piaget Lev Vygotsky Jerome Bruner	Individuals construct their knowledge. This knowledge helps them explain their views.	Cognitive development. Language development. Literacy.
Behaviorist theory	E. Thorndike B. Skinner J. Watson	Positive, reinforcing feedback strengthens behaviors, knowledge, and skills, making learning more effective.	Affirm. Encourage.
Psychoanalytic theory	З. Фрейд Э. Эриксон	Basic actions of socio-emotional development arising from human instincts.	Play activities. Play therapy.
Environmental theory	Ж. Боулби Ю. Бронфенбреннер	The influence of various environments on human growth, change, cognitive, moral, and communicative development.	Social policies on child development and education will reflect concepts of society, educational institutions, and the family environment.

Source: Saracho (2023).

The Philosophy of Early Education Is Mirrored in the Early Education Program

We have examined how the philosophy of early childhood education shapes the content and methodology of working with young children. We can observe how countries take these beliefs into account in their early childhood education programs. This study compared early childhood education programs in the United States, Singapore, Finland, and Australia. We analyzed them based on: (a) who the child is, (b) the program's content, (c) the methodology for guiding children's learning, and (d) the learning environment. The philosophy and ideals of the BNB are reflected in the BNB programs discussed here.

The above table shows that the curriculum of any country takes both classical and modern philosophies and concepts of early childhood education as a theoretical basis and reflects the children's sections of the curriculum. Childhood is a critical period for human development, a foundation for lifelong learning, a holistic development perspective that focuses on children's health, safety, and developmental areas at the same time, paying more attention to children's emotional and social development in early childhood, organizing children's learning in a way that guides rather than teaches, and stimulating them with an engaging, rich, and positive environment are reflected in the ideas of early childhood education.

Conclusion

The following conclusions can be drawn after analyzing early childhood education's classical and modern philosophical ideas and their reflections on the curriculum.

- Countries worldwide recognize childhood as the future stage of society and development and are paying attention to the center of political, economic, and socio-cultural development.
- Classical philosophical ideas have become the foundation and supporting theory of modern concepts and the theoretical basis of contemporary early childhood education programs.
- The philosophy of early childhood education has a content framework that includes the definition of a young child, the main subjects of early childhood education, the content of early childhood development, the characteristics of children's learning, and the role of parents, guardians, and the public in early childhood education.
- Early childhood education policies and programs of countries are developed based on classical philosophical ideas of early childhood education, and these classical philosophies guide today's early childhood education approaches through modern philosophical ideas.
- We can develop our preschool education policies, goals, and programs based on classical and modern philosophical ideas to be consistent with countries' educational policies and objectives and achieve the same level of academic development.

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