

Current Issue: Rethinking the Role of Early Childhood Education: Academic vs Child-Centered Learning

القضية الراهنة: إعادة النظر في دور التعليم خلال مرحلة الطفولة المبكرة: بين التعليم الأكاديمي والتعليم الموجه نحو الطفل

Chinda Alwan Mohammad*

Masters in education leadership, College of Education, Qatar University, State of Qatar

شيندا علوان محمد*

ماجستير قيادة تربوية، كلية التربية، جامعة قطر، دولة قطر

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الملخص: التعليم في مرحلة الطفولة المبكرة لا يتعلق فقط بالنمو الأكاديمي للطفل، بل يتعلق أيضًا بتنمية شخصيته العاطفية والاجتماعية والمعرفية والجسدية بقوة. يبدأ التعليم في مرحلة الطفولة المبكرة منذ ولادة الطفل وحتى لحظة قبوله في المدرسة. إنهما الفترة الأكثر حساسية في حياة الطفل لأنها المرة الأولى التي يتفاعل فيها مع الأطفال الآخرين والمعلمين والآباء وأفراد العائلة الآخرين. لقد أظهر التعليم في مرحلة الطفولة المبكرة آثارًا إيجابية في الجوانب الاجتماعية واهتمامات التعليم مثل العلوم وتكنولوجيا المعلومات والهندسة والرياضيات (STEM) في هذه الورقة، سوف نناقش دور التعليم في مرحلة الطفولة المبكرة فيما يتعلق بالتعلم التقليدي والأكاديمي مقابل التعلم القائم على اللعب والتوجيه نحو الطفل. التعلم التقليدي الأكاديمي هو تعلم محوره الأكاديمي بشكل خالص وتوجيهه من قبل المعلم، بينما التعلم القائم على اللعب أو التوجيه نحو الطفل يتم تصميمه وفقًا لاهتمامات الطفل. يجعل الطفل قويًا اجتماعيًا وعاطفيًا وأكاديميًا. سوف نناقش هذه النهج بتفصيل ونستعرض مزاياها وسلبياتها. بتحليل نقدي حول أي نهج أفضل لتعزيز تعلم الأطفال ونموهم وكيف يمكن تنفيذه فيما يخص الأطفال الصغار ومراكز الرعاية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: التعليم في مرحلة الطفولة المبكرة (ECE)، اجتماعي، أكاديمي، عاطفي، قائم على اللعب، توجيه نحو الطفل، STEM.

Abstract: Early childhood education (ECE) is not only about the academic upbringing of a child. It concerns a child's strong emotional, social, cognitive, and physical character development. Early childhood education of a child starts from his birth to the moment he is admitted to school. It is the most crucial time of a child's life because it is the first time they interact with other children, teachers, parents, and other family members. Early childhood education has positively affected social aspects of educational interests such as STEM (Science et al.). In this paper, we will discuss the role of early childhood education concerning traditional and academic learning and play-based and child-centred learning. Academic traditional learning is purely academic-centred and teacher-dominant, whereas play-based or child-centred learning is designed according to the child's interests. It makes a child socially, emotionally, and academically strong. We will discuss these approaches in-depth, along with their pros and cons. With a critical analysis of which approach is better for children to enhance their learning and growth and how it can be implemented in toddlers and childcare centres.

Keywords: Early Childhood Education (ECE), Social, Academic, Emotional, Play-Based, Child-Centred, STEM.

Introduction

Early childhood education (ECE) is not only about preparing for primary school. It concerns children's emotional, social, cognitive, and physical character development. It is essential for children's broad and robust lifelong learning and well-being. Early childhood education makes children responsible citizens in the future. The importance of early childhood education has been highlighted in nations. International bodies like UNESCO which are taking global initiatives to reduce the illiteracy rate, highlight this issue at summits (Nance, 2009).

According to the definitions, children's early childhood education starts from birth to the moment he is admitted to kindergarten. It is the most crucial time of life because it is the first time a child interacts with other children, teachers, parents, and other family members. So, it is essential because this will develop a long-term interest in relationships that will stay with them throughout their lifetime. Early childhood education lays down the ground roots of their socio-emotional relationships with their parents and teachers that will continue throughout their educational journey. It is wrong to say that early childhood education is just about a child's primary learning (Danniels & Pyle, 2018).

While there exist varying definitions of early childhood education in the literature, it is important to note that the choice of definition of early childhood education for the purposes of this paper does not substantially affect the recommendations or conclusions presented herein. Regardless of whether early childhood education is defined as commencing at birth until a child enters kindergarten or extending up to eight years of age, the paper focuses on the specific aspects of the role of early childhood education concerning traditional, academic, play-based, and child-centred learning. Therefore, readers can rest assured that the choice of definition is not a determining factor in the validity and robustness of the paper's recommendations and conclusion.

Early childhood education has multidimensional future outcomes but is positive in every single way. Early childhood education has positively affected social aspects of educational interests such as STEM. It helps parents and teachers identify their child's academic and non-academic interests, such as sports or hobbies. Such involvement of parents and teachers in their child's life at this early stage helps to build a strong bond between them, which results in a child starting to trust their parents and teachers. According to research, when children are comfortable in the environment around them, they grasp and learn things more quickly and efficiently (Nance, 2009).

This paper argues for a balanced approach in ECE, integrating academic and play-based methodologies to best support children's holistic development. Only those people who choose early childhood education as their career, the ones who know its importance and sensitivity and feel happy to leave a positive footprint on a child's life. The essential part of this field is to help children grow and learn, but it gives a lot more to us as it helps us to grow in various aspects of life. So many youngsters

are pursuing a bachelor's degree in early childhood education to pursue their careers in this field (Danniels & Pyle, 2018).

Significant challenges come with great opportunities, as one of the biggest challenges for an early education teacher is maintaining one-on-one attentiveness with a child. At the same time, many children are in the class. During sessions, a teacher is more concentrated on a single child's needs and interests, and at the same time, he has to look after other children who also need their attention. It is not easy to find out how to take all the students together, but with patience, teachers figure out who to look after every child. Teachers should not think about perfection but instead take it with the flow (Nance, 2009).

Teachers should put children's interests in their session plans to get the best early childhood education outcomes. Some checkboxes need to be checked, but children's interests play a significant role in this because it helps them learn and grow fast. Teachers should choose those specific subject topics that attract an individual child and bring them as class lectures or give children home activities about those topics or activities, which could more often keep children engaged; these tasks help them to develop thinking beyond Yes and No. Creative games can depict math numbers, and science can be depicted in the arts (Danniels & Pyle, 2018).

Early childhood education provides excellent opportunities in the job sector, not only as a teacher but in many other sectors. In law, one can pursue a career as a child and family advocate. In the public sector, one can pursue a career as a policymaker, child development counsellor, or professional development facilitator. As an early childhood educationist. Childcare administrator, care centre director, childcare program administrator, and Preschool administrator (Anderson et al., 2003). According to United States statistics, by 2028, the number of child administrators will rise to seven percent, and there will be a two percent growth in the childcare administrator profession and a gradual increase in Montessori teachers (Anderson et al., 2003).

In this paper, we will discuss the role of early childhood education concerning traditional and academic learning and play-based and child-centred learning. We will discuss these approaches in-depth, along with their pros and cons. With a critical analysis of which approach is better for children to enhance their learning and growth and how it can be implemented in toddlers and early childhood education institutions.

Literature Review

Bakken, Brown, and Downing (2017) have shown that the social environment dramatically impacts a child's upbringing. More gaps and a less friendly environment harm a child than a child raised in a socially friendly environment. With rapid modernization, single parenting is becoming more common. Single parenting is a significant reason behind children growing up in a socially distant environment, sometimes even without necessities, which results in a bad start to life for them (Bakken et al., 2017). It shows a correlation between

single parenting and early childhood education. Children of single parents are likely less successful due to a rough start. An adolescent's environment is affected due to increased women's labor (Bakken et al., 2017).

Barnett (1995) states that rough-life parents often lack access to good childcare programs. The percentage of children grown in a socially unfriendly environment rises from sixteen percent to twenty-one percent. Government officials and policymakers must launch proper and improved childcare programs nationally that could reduce the burden of single parents and parents who are living in poverty. This could also bring a sense of equality among all the children (Barnett, 1995). All these challenges can be eradicated by giving children early childhood education, which will benefit them and society, making them socially active and responsible in the future (Barnett, 1995).

Early childhood education starts from when a child is born to eight years of age (Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE), 2023). So, it is essential to keenly implement the learning approach and design the teaching method because children are susceptible at that stage, and their social and emotional state of mind is being developed.

Some of the theories used in early childhood education are the social phases of cognitive development. This theory consists of different stages. The first is the sensorimotor phase, which starts from birth to two years; during this time, learning is based on the physical actions of the adults surrounding the child and the interactions.

The second is the preoperational phase; this phase starts at age two and ends at seven (Nance, 2009). Thinking developed during this time is non-logical, irreversible, and somewhat egoistic, so the method used for teaching during this phase should include more symbols because children are also developing imagination skills (Nance, 2009).

The third is the concrete operational phase, which phase starts from age seven to twelve; in this phase, the demonstration of thoughts done in symbols should be systematic and logical in terms of manipulation because thinking developed by a child is non-logical, irreversible, and less egocentric (Nance, 2009).

The last and final stage of this process cycle is the formal operational phase; this phase starts from age twelve and continues here; things should be explained logically because a child's emotional development is very egocentric (Nance, 2009).

Academic achievements in the later stages of a child's life depend highly on his early childhood education because his brain is being developed during all these years. Many students start their kindergarten with extensive delay and need to have primary language and academic skills, making them struggle to cope with students. These children fail to go for repetition of classes or remedial, which eventually makes academics unattractive for these children. These are the children

who, when they grow up, become responsible citizens, not only a problem for their parents but for the state, teens, and school and college administration because they are primarily involved in wrongdoings (Danniels & Pyle, 2018).

All these failures and negative upbringing can be prevented by not delaying the early childhood education of a child, where he learns the most fruitful things that are highly mandatory for him to become a successful person in the future. Research studies have shown that learning and memory brain development are genuinely dependent on one another; this happens in the early stages of life with the child throughout his lifetime (Danniels & Pyle, 2018).

Early childhood education is based upon several parameters that include encouragement of exploration, providing essential skills, a celebration of developmental improvements, practice and familiarization with new skills, avoiding and protection from bullying, wrong behaviors and doings, good interactions, guidance, and limits of behavior. All these parameters are based on a child's visionary, auditory, and socio-emotional interactions with his parents and caretakers. These parameters show that brain and child development are correlational, and these parameters can be given to all children because they do not require any money to buy toys or other gadgets (Cutter-Mackenzie & Edwards, 2013).

In early childhood education, children learn a lot about reading: words are composed of various sounds when printed and sequentially. These words are deciphered on the page according to the alphabet's phonetics and meanings. When these words combine, they are mainly used in conveying stories and information. Children of a very young age have an understanding of these words. Children with early education and language are among the most active students and benefit from elementary school counseling. Children who show a delay in the first year of their early childhood education face difficulty coping during the second year of their elementary school (Cutter-Mackenzie & Edwards, 2013).

Importance of Early Childhood Education (ECE)

A young child's brain is more like a sponge. It can absorb a lot of information and actions from their surroundings, letting it play an essential role in a child's learning process. Early childhood education is of great importance in developing skills like socializing, participation, general development, the importance of education, respect for others, teamwork attitude, resilience, active learning, concentration power, patience, and exposure to diversity. These are briefly explained below to show their role in developing a child's personality (Edwards, 2017).

Socialization and Participation

Early education assists with creating self-assurance in children's adolescence by wiping out their timid nature. Socializing is an essential component, as socially

awkward children are not acceptable in our society. So, a child must have a socially developed personality. During this stage, adolescents figure out how to share, coordinate, and take turns after one another (Howes & James, 2002). In this sheltered atmosphere given to the kids, they will figure out how to get through things with their teachers' instructions. Children are usually shy and hesitant to participate, so when they are around, people who interact with them start to adapt to their environment and start participating; this is the result of the social development of a child, which is only done through early childhood education (Howes & James, 2002).

Active Learning Certainty and Self Respect

When children play around, they actively explore new things and learn them. They make problems and solve them, developing a sense of critical thinking. A feeling of prosperity is significant for an individual to investigate their gifts. The positive attitude with companions and instructors energizes a positive perspective on themselves. This significantly affects early childhood education (Levine & Munsch, 2010).

Mental Health and Introduction to Miscellany

Expertly made exercises in preschool upgrade the advancement of the cerebrum. Different exercises, including analytical and critical thinking, help them build their abilities (Baker-Henningham, 2014). The advanced world has an excellent variety, and youngsters should be educated to acknowledge and recognize societal distinctions. Every new term introduced, perception and individual can form a small kid into the individual they will grow up to be. This is because it is conceivable to have a more prominent impact on an individual during their youth. Most guardians get this and give youth training the significance it is expected.

Late examinations uncover the significance of early childhood education as it can impact the psychological and passion of youngsters and the actual improvement of a youngster. Consequently, the nature of the schooling of youngsters guarantees youth instruction. To consistently ensure they start right on time, so it does not become an issue later on.

Issue and Controversy

Traditional Academic Learning

Traditional academic learning is the early childhood education program that is extensively present for children to get enrolled in, and these traditional programs are mostly opted for by the parents of their children. Some of the physiognomies of academic-based learning are that traditional academic learning is highly organized and structured. Teachers guide children for learning and plan activities according to a group of children in the class. Most of the time is spent memorizing alphabets and phonetics, colours, shapes, and numerics, as well as involvement in other academic activities such as handwriting sessions (Delialioğlu & Yildirim, 2007).

A small part of this organized day consists of a few extracurricular activities, including completing colouring worksheets and drawings. Academic-based programs sometimes burden children because they contain proper vocabulary, math, and science questions. Skills-based Montessori is rich in language. Letters and numbers are on every wall as posters. Shapes of chart paper are posted on boards, just like in a conventional, colourful classroom (Fantuzzo et al., 2000). The children's whole day is spent sitting and writing. Academic-based learning is more likely to be about productive and beneficial results (Fantuzzo et al., 2000).

While formulating traditional academic learning, the primary purpose kept in mind is to prepare children for school. These structured early childhood education programs benefit low-income families because they are less educated, preparing their children to compete with others (Fantuzzo et al., 2000). Traditional academic learning in early childhood education is considered dictated or is also known as teacher-managed. During these sessions, teachers instruct students and assign them tasks. Undoubtedly, teachers take children in a more structured way, planning even day activities for children ahead of time. These class sessions are arranged to learn alphabets, phonetics, shapes, numerics, and other academic activities with negligible extracurricular activities (Fantuzzo et al., 2000).

Parents and guardians prefer this type of academic learning because they are comfortable and satisfied by knowing that their children are learning academic skills early, but researchers have contradicted this point of view; they say that children can learn an academic skill in a later stage of life, and this is the time for their social and mental development.

Play-Based/Child-Centred Learning

In play-based early childhood education, activities are planned based on children's interests. Play-based learning, also known as child-centred learning in early childhood education, demonstrates many early childhood education programs. Child-centred learning is often divided into home activities, science activities, reading books, outdoor games, and other extra and co-curricular activities. Teachers help children to play, encouraging their social skills with the activities ("Play-based learning - Department of Education," 2020). Suppose it is like children are just playing and having fun. In that case, they are memorizing essential skills, including critical social interactions, building relationships such as making friends of their age, and educating them about symbols as most things are labelled with symbols and minor mathematical problems ("Play-based learning - Department of Education," 2020).

In play-based learning, the emphasis is on making children learn through games, and activities are planned according to children's interests. Early childhood institutions with such programs are less common because they are costly, and people still need to understand their importance in the growth of their children. Some of the features of play-based learning are that the class sessions are designed as art, math, science,

dramatics, and games. The children are to choose the activities of their interest and roam around.

Children's artwork is more likely to be displayed on boards than other posters and natural light is brought into the room to make it comfortable and friendly for students. Teachers emphasize teaching socio-emotional and cognitive skills more. Academic skills are part of it throughout the program. First-hand and hands-on experiences are learned through these activities, which are remembered throughout life. Activities are focused on the process of learning rather than immediately tangible productive and beneficial outcomes ("Play-based learning - Department of Education," 2020).

Pros and Cons of Traditional Academic Learning

Everything has pros as well as cons. The same goes for traditional academic learning. That focuses on school readiness skills and aims to prepare children for the school years. While there are several pros of academic learning, at the same time, there are some serious disadvantages that significantly impact children in the future.

Pros of Academic Learning

There are several advantages of traditional academic learning, such as that the child gets used to an organized routine for the future. A structure and a routine can help children flourish. They become more responsible as they grow up by being encouraged to take responsibility and fostering positive attitudes towards authority, where children learn to obey mentors and listen to others. They tend to learn patience and teamwork in academic tasks. Academic learning at the beginning prepares children for future academic life by being exposed to a routine early on, makes for a smoother transition to formal schooling later on, and helps with their admissions, as many elementary schools look favourably on preschool-educated kids. An academic learning approach can be stimulating and challenging. It can be ideal for young kids who excel verbally, creatively, and cognitively. It provides more formal instruction, thoroughly grounding children in early math, science, reading, and other subjects. Children become familiar with them very young and start having vital concepts. Children easily cope with other students in kindergarten and the future. Children learn to communicate with others ("Advantage and Disadvantage of Traditional Classroom Learning," 2020).

Cons of Academic Learning

While early academic exposure may appear advantageous at first, follow-up studies do not show good results in the long term. On the contrary, subjection to early academic instruction increases children's tendency to distance themselves from the school's goals and to drop out of it mentally or physically, especially in the case of boys (Katz, 2010).

Some parents are easily impressed by their children's early acquisition of academics. However, they are often unaware of the harm it does. Traditional academic

learning in early childhood education tends to have a more set curriculum. It follows strict guidelines for what material is covered, which burdens a child at a very early stage and age. Putting too much academic burden on children makes them lose interest in learning. Learning subjects such as reading, writing, and math before one is ready can lead to frustration and interfere with a love of learning. (Hirsh-Pasek, 1991) Some critics argue that the academic learning approach has little, if any, impact on academic success. It is claimed that children's advantages over those without academic education usually disappear after the second grade (Puma et al., 2010; Taylor, 2018).

Judging children and telling them their ideas are 'right' or 'wrong' affects their self-confidence and can make them ashamed or embarrassed for trying (Brown, 2012).

Children taking overall academic-based early childhood education programs will likely have more socio-emotional difficulties than their fellows. It is due to the socioeconomic status of children, especially those taking traditional academic programs with fewer social activities and opportunities. These academic early childhood education programs need to work on the social and mental development of the child (Almon & Miller, 2011). An academic early education learning approach may lessen creativity, curiosity, and interest as they are told what to learn and do (Fuller et al., 2017).

Pros and Cons of Play-Based/Child-Centred Learning

Play-based learning is a modernized type of learning in early childhood education. By name, it seems attractive and impactful on the child. It needs to be more structured. Kids can move around, choose their activities, and play with kids in class. They thus have plenty of free-play time. They also have lots of time for exploration and open-ended and imaginative activities, with several pros and cons to this learning approach.

Pros of Play-Based Learning

Children in a play-based early childhood education setting can choose their activities and topics, which keeps them interested. Engagement in active play-based learning makes a child physically active and strong. It helps the child develop language skills as he interacts with peers and adults from whom he learns new words. Play-based activity doubles the child's learning power because conversation with people helps them grasp things more quickly than memorizing worksheets. These programs also encourage activities like music and arts, which improve the child's rhyming skills (Drew, 2019). These rhyming skills eventually lead to the improved reading power of the child. These fun activities make academic activities enjoyable for the child. Rhyming skills improve the child's memorizing power and develop the ability to differentiate between different sounds.

According to Diamond et al. (2007), children from play-based early childhood educational programs exhibit enhanced self-regulation, cognitive flexibility, and working memory. Play significantly contributes to

social and emotional character development. Through play, children learn vital skills such as turn-taking, delaying gratification, conflict negotiation, problem-solving, goal-sharing, flexibility, and coping with disappointment (Christakis & Christakis, 2010). These social skills are foundational for later academic success. Furthermore, play nurtures a child's creativity and imagination (Drew, 2019), with imaginative play fostering empathy, an essential component for intellectual and social-emotional success (Christakis & Christakis, 2010).

Cons of play-based learning

Play-based early childhood education, with its loosely structured approach, offers flexibility in daily schedules, allowing children to decide the duration of their activities. This method can be advantageous for some children, yet it might not be as effective as a tightly scheduled environment for those who thrive under more structured conditions (Haughton & Ellis, 2013).

Another disadvantage to a play-based learning approach is that it can be challenging for some children to transition from play-based to academic school settings (English, 2014). Children may not be exposed directly to learning letters, numbers, or scientific concepts in a play-based setting. Learning may not lead to the proper learning of a child. It has not always been the perfect approach, as it may not guide children properly. Most parents disagree with this type of early childhood education program. Moreover, they could be unsafe in certain circumstances. These play activities could lead to bullying in children and quarrels during sessions (Drew, 2019).

Taking a Position

Both approaches hold significant value, but their full potential is best realized when integrated rather than implemented in isolation. Therefore, a balanced in-between approach should be developed, based more on play-based learning and less on traditional academic learning. Children learn more during fun activities than sitting and reading the same thing, but even during activities, they need proper guidance to process information. Only play-based would diminish their academic interest and make them only socially and emotionally active. In contrast, only academic programs will make them compete academically but socially and emotionally unfit with their peers. An intermediate approach would be the best in the current scenario so that a child's personality is equally developed in social, emotional, and academic aspects (Drew, 2020).

In-Depth Discussion

As a kindergarten principal, the proposed method integrates theories from traditional academic and play-based learning approaches. This blended approach incorporates elements of the Montessori model, the Waldorf method, and direct instruction.

Montessori Model

Maria Montessori, an Italian educator, theorized this method. It is based upon the self-centred activities of a

child, with mentorship from the teacher. It mainly emphasizes designing activities according to the interests of the children and stresses adopting the child's environment by going to the child's level. This approach is known as the auto-dictated method, which is self-correcting and introduces several new concepts.

The primary steps of the Montessori method involve mentors paying attention to the child and guiding them within a controlled environment, allowing the child to progress at their own pace. Imaginative teaching materials are considered the heart of the process, empowering children to continue at their rhythm and recognize their errors. Observing a Montessori classroom might give the perception of "controlled chaos," as each child independently engages in their chosen learning activity, immersed in their own space.

Children are divided into three age groups: newborns to two and a half years, children from two and a half to six years, and children from six to twelve years. Activities involving exploration, manipulation, order, repetition, abstraction, and communication help children learn more efficiently. The mentor aids the first two age groups in processing and using their senses to explore their environment, while the last age group works with abstract concepts based on their newly developed critical reasoning, imagination, and creativity (Edwards, 2002).

Waldorf Method

In 1920, Rudolf Steiner introduced the Waldorf method, implemented in 500 early childhood educational institutes, care centres, and 100 American schools. This method aims to educate a child holistically, addressing social upbringing, emotional development, and academic progress. It encompasses all phases of child development, integrating components such as intelligence, arts, dance, drama, music, languages, science, mathematics, spirituality, and games. This method prepares children from kindergarten through high school, focusing on arts to expand a child's creativity and imagination.

Steiner's educational philosophy involves the concept of "vital" or etheric energy, which provides a psychosomatic linkage between physical and intellectual development. This energy is essential for sequential stages of cognitive development. According to Steiner, forced-formal learning before children are ready can displace and atrophy these energy forces prematurely, negatively impacting their development and potentially leading to issues like attention deficit disorders.

The Waldorf method emphasizes the relationship between physical maturation and cognitive development. For example, the criterion for first-grade admission in Waldorf schools is based on physical changes such as the second dentition or the emergence of permanent teeth, which correspond with the onset of concrete operational thinking. By integrating artistic and creative academic programs, children in the Waldorf method experience comprehensive development,

enabling them to make informed professional choices in the future (Ogletree, 1997).

Direct Instruction

This method is the opposite of the Montessori and Waldorf methods because where there is much freedom given to children, some rules and boundaries should be made to make them organized and responsible for the future. So, it is essential for the implementation of the direct instruction model. This model is the mentor-dominant model. In this model, the actual teacher makes activities for all the students and takes them all in one place, but this helps them academically, which significantly helps them understand the importance of rules and helps them follow them. This model prepares them for academic tests in the future. This will accelerate their learning in the academic domain. Improve their thinking critically and analytically. However, this model cannot be implemented single-handedly; it should blend with the other two models to attract the children's interest in academics (Nance, 2009).

Different Perspective

A professor of philosophy, Dr. Al Gini, explained the importance of being lazy. He stated that we as adults are lazy due to a lack of enjoyment and relaxation time and are less productive. He says this leisure time is essential; we give the most minor importance to all-day work without time to relax. If this is so bad for us at this age of adulthood, then we should think twice about children who cannot even perform well if their playing time is restricted or they are not allowed to play. We should not ignore making children productive; we must give them proper playtime (Gini, 2006).

Another early childhood education theorist, Pellegrini, stated that we should more often let children play for a significant time and avoid giving them overprotective, which would ruin them socially and emotionally; this will make them socially awkward and introverted. He says that playing plays a vital role in the overall character-building of a child (Pellegrini & Bohn, 2005).

Play is when a child experiences all sorts of social moments and emotions. During play, when he wins, he feels a sense of achievement and positiveness; when losing, he learns patience and encourages him to accept their victories, how to cooperate with others, and develops the ability to listen to others' advice. This unlocks their imagination and creativity by finding new ways to win and helps them to understand moral values and ethics. Play-based learning influences the brain in developing logical, critical, analytical, and language skills. When kids play with their parents, it makes their bond with their parents more assertive (Ramey & Ramey, 2004).

One of the best theorists on play-based learning, Dr. Edgar Klugman, states that the different categories of play-based learning are functional play, where children gain motor and practice skills when they enjoy repetitive play-based activities (Oliver & Klugman, 2004).

Constructive play is a process in which a child develops reasoning, problem-solving, and creativity skills by making something or solving puzzles. Third is Pretend play, and lastly, games with rules play. In this type of play-based learning, children learn and practice cooperation, mutual understanding, and logical thinking as it involves pre-set rules such as chess, card games, and Scrabble.

Integration Framework

Integrating Montessori, Waldorf, and Direct Instruction methodologies in a kindergarten setting presents a unique opportunity to blend the strengths of each approach while addressing their individual limitations. This integration can create a holistic educational environment that nurtures a child's academic, creative, social, and emotional development.

Balanced Curriculum Design:

- *Montessori's Child-Centered Approach:* Incorporate self-directed activities based on children's interests, promoting independence and self-correction.
- *Waldorf's Creative and Holistic Emphasis:* Integrate arts, music, drama, and storytelling to foster creativity and emotional intelligence.
- *Direct Instruction's Structured Learning:* Employ direct instruction for core academic skills, ensuring a strong foundation in literacy and numeracy.

Adaptive Learning Environments:

- *Montessori's Prepared Environment:* Create a learning space that allows children to choose activities aligned with their developmental stage and interests.
- *Waldorf's Emphasis on Imagination:* Design classrooms that stimulate imagination and creativity, using natural materials and artistic elements.
- *Direct Instruction's Clarity and Efficiency:* Establish clear expectations and routines, particularly for group learning activities, to enhance focus and efficiency.

Integrated Teaching Approach:

- *Combining Methods:* Teachers can fluidly transition between roles as facilitators (Montessori), mentors (Waldorf), and instructors (Direct Instruction) based on the activity and learning objectives.
- *Collaborative Projects:* Design group projects that blend creative expression (Waldorf) with problem-solving and practical skills (Montessori), guided by clear objectives and instructions (Direct Instruction).
- *Assessment and Feedback:* Use a variety of assessment tools, including observational assessments (Montessori), creative portfolios (Waldorf), and structured testing (Direct Instruction), to gauge student progress comprehensively.

- Parental and Community Involvement:

Foster a community that understands and supports the integrated approach, involving parents in educational activities and decision-making.

Addressing Implementation Challenges

- Teacher Training and Professional

Development:

Ensure teachers are adequately trained in each methodology and understand how to integrate them effectively.

- Balancing Flexibility with Structure:

Strive to balance the child-led approach of Montessori with the structure of Direct Instruction, without stifling creativity encouraged by the Waldorf method.

- Customizing to Individual Needs:

Recognize and address the varying needs of children, adapting the approach to suit different learning styles and developmental stages.

- Resource Allocation:

Allocate resources judiciously to support diverse activities – from Montessori materials to Waldorf artistic supplies and resources for structured learning.

- Communication and Collaboration:

Foster open communication among educators and between educators and parents to ensure a cohesive implementation of the integrated approach.

By thoughtfully integrating these methodologies, a kindergarten can offer a rich, varied, and balanced educational experience that prepares children for future academic and life challenges. This approach not only nurtures the child's intellectual abilities but also their creative, social, and emotional development, creating well-rounded individuals equipped to thrive in a complex world.

Recommendations

A nation's future depends on its next-generation health and social and emotional well-being. Today's children will become tomorrow's successors in different sectors of Qatar. They, as the citizens, will have the responsibility of the state. If we look after the next generation wisely, there will be a favourable payback for us, but if we neglect it, we will suffer from its adverse outcomes, and the state will suffer because of it. We must work with them and invest our time and energy in them to make them responsible citizens and successful professionals.

The following recommendations will help us take one step toward producing a better generation for the future of Qatar. The recommendation includes raising awareness on the role of early childhood education and its significance by educating parents and caretakers on the child-centered/play-based learning approach and how it differs from the teacher-directed/academic learning approach. A balanced in-between learning approach should be implemented after considering the children's specific needs and finding the right mix between the learning approaches while teaching children moral and ethical values, making them learn the

basics of life, and making them take an interest in arts and culture to protect the culture and heritage. Make them understand the social and cultural differences so that they respect their other fellows. Make children organized and expect them to work to become responsible citizens and family members, let them play freely to keep them fresh and active, and make them understand the importance of academics so that they get educated following a gradual transition to a more academic setting as they age.

As we recognize the paramount importance of nurturing our future generations, it becomes crucial to translate these overarching goals into concrete actions. By delineating specific roles and responsibilities, we can ensure that educators, policymakers, and parents work collaboratively and effectively. Each stakeholder plays a pivotal part in shaping the educational landscape, and their combined efforts are essential for the holistic development of our children. The following detailed steps provide a roadmap for each group, ensuring that our collective efforts are both targeted and impactful. These steps aim to foster an environment where children can grow into well-rounded individuals, grounded in their cultural heritage and equipped with the skills needed for success in a globalized world.

For Educators:

- Implement Child-Centred Learning Approaches:

Provide training for educators on child-centered and play-based learning methodologies. Encourage creativity, exploration, and hands-on activities in the classroom.

- Incorporate Moral and Ethical Education:

Develop a curriculum that includes moral and ethical lessons, focusing on empathy, respect, and cultural understanding.

- Promote Arts and Cultural Education:

Integrate arts and cultural studies into the curriculum to preserve Qatar's heritage and encourage creative expression.

- Flexible Academic Transitioning:

Gradually increase academic rigor in a way that aligns with the developmental stages of children, ensuring they are not overwhelmed.

For Policymakers:

- Awareness Campaigns on Early Education:

Initiate national campaigns to educate the public on the importance of early childhood education and various learning approaches.

- Funding and Resources for Schools:

Allocate funds specifically for the development of child-centered learning environments and arts/cultural education.

- Policy Development for Inclusive Education:

Formulate policies that ensure educational institutions cater to the diverse needs of children, including those with different cultural backgrounds and learning abilities.

- Support for Educator Training:

Provide resources and incentives for teacher training in modern, child-focused educational methods.

For Parents:

- Parental Workshops and Seminars:

Attend workshops on child-centered learning and how to support this at home.

- Engagement in Children's Learning:

Actively participate in their child's education by understanding and supporting their learning style and interests.

- Promotion of Cultural Awareness at Home:

Introduce children to various aspects of Qatari culture and heritage through stories, music, and family activities.

- Balance Between Play and Learning:

Encourage a healthy balance of free play and structured learning activities at home to complement their school experiences.

By implementing these targeted recommendations, all stakeholders can contribute to creating a nurturing and effective educational environment that prepares children in Qatar for a successful and responsible future.

Conclusion

In understanding the crucial role of early childhood education (ECE) in shaping a child's social, moral, and emotional development, we must appreciate the journey this field has undergone since its inception in the 1960s. Various models, ranging from traditional academic learning to more modern, engaging methods like play-based or child-centered learning, have evolved to meet the changing needs of children and policymakers alike. While traditional methods lay a strong academic foundation, modern approaches excel in nurturing a child's social and emotional well-being.

However, the key lies in finding a balance. It's not a matter of choosing one over the other, but rather integrating the strengths of both. Parents, often influenced by older educational philosophies, may lean towards traditional academic learning due to its structured nature and relative affordability compared to the resource-intensive play-based learning. Yet, it's crucial to recognize that a child's education is not just about academic success but also about developing well-rounded individuals.

Implementing an intermediate approach that harmoniously blends elements of the Montessori model, the Waldorf method, and Direct Instructions could offer a comprehensive educational experience. This balanced approach not only supports the diverse needs of children but also acknowledges the varying capacities of families and educational systems, especially in contexts like Qatar.

It's important to remember that the choices we make in ECE are not just about individual families or children; they have far-reaching implications for the future of our

nations. The decisions we make today in educating our youngest citizens will shape the society of tomorrow. As such, we must approach these decisions with a balanced perspective, mindful of both the long-term societal benefits and the immediate needs of our children.

In conclusion, the journey of ECE is ongoing and ever-evolving. It's a field that requires continuous reflection and adaptation. As we consider the future of our children and, by extension, our society, we must ask ourselves: Are we doing enough to ensure that our educational approaches are as multifaceted and dynamic as the children they are meant to serve? This thought-provoking question beckons us to constantly evaluate and improve our educational systems, ensuring that every child receives the well-rounded upbringing they deserve.

Declarations

Conflict of interest: The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose. The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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