Critically Discuss the Purposes of ECE Through the Analysis of International Pedagogical Perspectives

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Abstract

Children are observed as potentially productive individuals whose 'productivity' is critical to the future and development of society (Ang, 2014). Therefore, society expects that children need to be prepared for future productivity. Heckman (2011) suggests that significant economic benefits can be gained from investing in early childhood development. Specifically, early education is an invaluable investment for governments and families. Based on this perspective, countries invest in early care and education (Kulic et al., 2019). Most countries have attempted to achieve multiple purposes in ECE (Cochran, 2011; Kulic et al., 2019). Some are child-focused purposes, such as preparation for compulsory education and the socialisation of migrant children. There are also parent-oriented purposes, such as emancipating women and encouraging them to enter the labour market and meeting the childcare needs of working parents (Bianchi & Milkie, 2010). This research attempts to use the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) and the Reggio approach as examples to critically discuss one of the purposes of ECE from an international pedagogical perspective. The purpose is to prepare for primary school. This is a controversial sexual purpose. This purpose will lead schools, parents, and teachers to place an over-emphasis on developing children's academic skills and neglect other children's needs. Therefore, the risk of schoolization of early education needs to be prevented.

Keywords: the purpose of ECE, Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS), Reggio approach

1. Introduction

The most effective investment in education with the best returns, is made in children below compulsory school age (Moss, 2013). Children are observed as potentially productive individuals whose 'productivity' is critical to the future and development of society (Ang, 2014). Therefore, society expects that children need to be prepared for future productivity. According to the Family Stress Model, experiences of economic hardship or poverty can leave parents under stress and emotional distress. This may harm children's development (Kulic et al., 2019). Furthermore, families reproduce their class-specific cultural capital through different belief systems, knowledge, language and behaviour codes. This creates advantages for children from families of higher social class, who are more likely to succeed in educational institutions (Lareau, 2014). Given the significant inequalities under family circumstances and resources that children may experience in their early years, early education becomes a key tool for equalising the cognitive development and educational achievement of children from different socio-economic backgrounds. Heckman (2011) suggests that significant economic benefits can be gained from investing in early childhood development. Specifically, early education is an invaluable investment for governments and families. Based on this perspective, countries invest in early care and education (Kulic et al., 2019). In contrast, it is used to support parents and other family members in their child-rearing activities. Moreover, it also prepares children for primary school.

Most countries have attempted to achieve multiple purposes in ECE (Cochran, 2011; Kulic et al., 2019). Some are child-focused purposes, such as preparation for compulsory education and the socialisation of migrant

children. There are also parent-oriented purposes, such as emancipating women and encouraging them to enter the labour market and meeting the childcare needs of working parents (Bianchi & Milkie, 2010). Additionally, there is also a social development-oriented purpose, such as promoting social equity by investing in the early education of disadvantaged children. Genni (2012) and Ang (2014) have begun to call for a reorganisation of the purpose of ECE's focus on children's rights.

This research attempts to use the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) and the Reggio approach as examples to critically discuss one of the purposes of ECE from an international pedagogical perspective. The purpose is to prepare for primary school. In particular, the purpose is to help children successfully transition from ECE to primary school, which is highly controversial.

2. Definition of ECE

Mikko Ojala, a professor of ECE, first defined ECE as an interactive process in family, daycare and preschool life (Ojala,1978, as cited in Härkönen, 2002). ECE aims to promote the overall personal development of children from zero to six years. Härkönen (2002), based on Ojala (1978), asserts that ECE is an integrated system of early childhood practice, ECE science, disciplines and early childhood thinking. ECE is currently usually defined as formal or informal ECE services provided to pre-schoolers (Dahlberg et al., 2013). Early education and childcare services include a wide range of services. Formal education settings include nurseries, day nurseries, playgroups, children's centres and services (Lloyd, 2015). Informal education includes informal care and education by grandparents, friends and neighbours, babysitters or other family caregivers (Naumann et al., 2013). ECE includes various educational activities designed to promote the child's overall development, including cognitive, social, and physical health and preparation for elementary education (Lloyd, 2015). Early education in the present study refers to the early education and care activities children receive in educational settings before they reach school age.

3. Readiness and Preparation for Primary School

There has not been a precise definition of readiness, which has confused teachers and parents and sparked debates (Brooks & Murray, 2016). Teachers tend to identify readiness as a child's ability to deliberate, propensity and enthusiasm for learning and basic social skills (Brooks & Murray, 2016). Simultaneously, parents often prioritise academic skills such as literacy and numeracy skills (Rimm-Kaufman, 2000). Parents try to make a perfect transition from kindergarten to school by improving their children's academic ability, and more importantly, they expect their children to achieve academic achievement. The discourse of 'school readiness' is increasingly dominant (Moss, 2013), however, 'readiness' can have a broader definition. In terms of education, a child's voice should be respected, and the purpose of ECE should focus on readiness rather than a narrow understanding of school readiness, which exists in the pursuit of educational continuity. The complexity of the transition to school should not be reduced to a series of practices or actions. For example, they are setting rigorous standards for young children and using simple criteria to judge the readiness of children.

Conceptually, the term 'readiness' was controversial idealists perceived readiness as a phenomenon within the child (O'Farrelly et al., 2020). The readiness of a child to attend school depends on the function of the maturational processes inherent in each child. Empiricists believe that readiness emphasises the need for children to engage in a particular set of experiences to prepare for school (Brown, 2010). From an empiricist's perspective, ECE is a tool that provides children with the skills, knowledge and experiences they need to attend primary school (Neaum, 2016), which emphasises learning and teaching skills. The social constructivist framework regards readiness as a fluid structure defined by the social environment in which the child finds himself or herself. Furthermore, it emphasises that readiness is dependent on the social environment in which the child is placed (Moss, 2013). The interactionist perspective regarded 'readiness' as a 'two-way concept', meaning that readiness is constructed by the child's contribution to schooling and the school's contribution to the children (O' Farrelly et al., 2020). 'The two-way concept' has already had some impact on ECE, in particular the US, where there is increasing discussion on the need for school-ready for children (Brown, 2010). This indicates that not only do children need to be prepared for school, but schools need to be prepared for all children. Preparing for primary school in this research, not only indicates readiness. Preparation in this research is a complex, multidimensional concept that should not be simply generalised to school readiness (Brown, 2010). It requires the combined help of families, communities and schools to assist children successfully transition to primary school readiness.

4. The Importance of Transition

The purposes of the ECE are diverse. Preparing for primary school emphasises the two-way readiness of school and children (Brown,2010). The hallmark of readiness is that students can transition smoothly to the next stage. Transition emphasises the importance of educational continuity. ECE prepares for primary education by providing educational content for children below compulsory school age that will 'aim to develop the cognitive,

physical and socio-emotional skills necessary for participation in school and society' (Ang, 2014). In particular, the purpose is to help children successfully transition from ECE to primary school. A successful transition requires students to have the academic skills (such as mathematics and literacy) necessary to navigate their first year successfully (Broström, S. 2003). Children are also required to have social skills and emotional stability to adjust to school life (Yim, 2017). From activity theory, Leont'ev (1981) defines the primary learning activity for preschool children as playing, whilst learning is the primary learning activity for students (Leont'ev, 1981). Play is a sort of informal learning, whereas primary education is a formal one. The transition from preschool to primary school requires students to cross boundaries from a play-based activity system to a learning-based one (Woodhead & Moss, 2007). Both maturation and adjustment are developing processes that cannot be accelerated through experience or instruction. As a result, early education institutions and parents need to create a suitable environment that supports children to transition smoothly from preschool to primary school.

The government in the UK indicated in the 10-year development strategy of childcare that ECE is to help children have a good start in life (Neaum, 2016). ECE is considered to allow children to grow and develop. The purpose of early education to prepare for primary school is that there are always a number of levels in the educational continuum (Arnold et al., 2006). The change from early childhood to primary school is regarded as significant. Bronfenbrenner (1992) referred to the transition of children from preschool to primary school as an 'ecological change'. Children can realise their growth potential by studying with their families, friends, teachers and neighbours. The transition from children's environment to school is about learning how to 'integrate' into school, which is an important transition and a milestone in a child's life. It is also a key step for children in the process of education. Most children find this transition painful (Timperley et al., 2003) because children's sense of self-identity and security will be shaken as they move from a familiar environment to an unfamiliar environment. A successful transition will help children cope with the new study and school life stage. For the sake of children's long-term development, ECE needs to take the preparation for primary school as the purpose of education. Preschool curriculum should also seek a suitable way to help children make a smooth transition to primary education.

Situated learning theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991) provides a framework to explain the importance of transition. It assumes that learning is social and situational. Learning occurs in specific, shared social practices or situations (Broström, 2005). It is difficult for children to complete independent learning in unfamiliar and unsettling environments. Preschool teachers discovered that some well-functioning children became distressed when entering a new environment (Timperley et al., 2003). Children's self-identity and security will shake up. Transitions can be unsettling and frightening for children, threatening or undermining their self-confidence and self-efficacy. (Brooker, 2008, p. 4) This transition crucially affects children's psychological states, as well as their learning. If not handled properly, it has a long-term impact on children's lives (Timperley et al., 2003). The situated learning theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991) demonstrates that children need a transition to help them prepare for primary school, and the transition activities need to be changed from external to internal transition systems because external transition activities such as information exchange and school visits are insufficient for preparation (Broström, 2005). Preschool needs to understand the importance of internal transition activities and cultivate children's learning tendencies instead of their knowledge (Leont'ev, 1978).

ECE can use play as a transition tool to help children prepare for primary school (Broström, 1999). Play is perceived as an activity to guide the development of advanced psychological functions such as language, thinking and memory (Èl'konin, 1980). In contrast, play can enable children to acquire new abilities and help them achieve a successful transition whilst games can bridge schools. Preschool teachers can find the commonalities between early education and primary education, such as the same learning topic, and then use play to help children learn the same theme. When children enter primary school, it is easier to stimulate their learning enthusiasm when facing the same theme (Broström, 2005). Play can be a shared education method in preschool and primary school (Vygotskij & Cole, 1978). They paved the way for children to transition to a new level of development (Leont'ev, 1981).

Reggio Emilia is a pedagogy developed by Malaguzzi after the Second World War, focusing on ECE and primary education (Chicken, 2020). The philosophy and pedagogy originated from three primary sources: progressive trends in Europe and the US, the psychological theories of Piaget and Vygotsky and the left-wing political reforms in post-war Italy (Valentine, 2006). Indeed, the Reggio approach rejects pre-specified or age-related goals and a pre-determined curriculum. They believe that pre-determined goals for the end of a child's learning diminish the child's potential. Reggio favours a social pedagogy, and Reggio children are strong, capable and confident, and children can become active citizens in their own right (Maynard & Chicken, 2010). It regards children as investigators and explorers in their environment, with the role of the adult not as a guide or transmitter of knowledge but as a collaborative researcher who learns alongside the children (Boyd & Bath, 2017). The role of the adult is to facilitate and ensure the appropriate conditions for learning.

In the Reggio approach, the environment is considered the third teacher. Children are susceptible to their environment, which provides them with rich learning opportunities and encourages them to explore, discover and solve problems independently. As a result, the Reggio classroom is an open and accessible environment. Children can explore, play and learn without interruption. The resources at Reggio classroom are enormous, and openly displayed to enhance ideas and opportunities. (Chicken, 2022). It believes that outdoor spaces are just as important as classrooms and that the space needs to be designed to allow children to move freely between the two (Valentine, 2006). As such, it helps children have free access to stimulating resources. In addition, all the resources and materials in the classroom and other areas are thought-provoking. Reggio wants to use the environment to encourage children to reason outside the box and become masters of their learning (Soler & Miller, 2003). Reggio approach helps children acquire creativity, curiosity, learning tendencies, exploration and problem-solving skills by providing a strong environment. When these skills are acquired, it will not only help them successfully transition to primary school but also assist them in their lifelong learning.

In addition, collaborative working is an important element of the Reggio approach. It can range from collaboration with individuals, pairs or small groups, and children have complete autonomy in forming groups (Boyd & Bath, 2017). In the Reggio classroom, multiple levels of learning will occur. Children can work with children, and they can also work with adults. Children can also support the group and move between groups as capable spectators. Children understand the importance of teamwork as they work collaboratively and accept the need to rely on their peers. This process also provides children with the opportunity to think creatively, learning to reason differently, respect others and be tolerant (Chincken, 2020). In this approach, learning is open-ended, and an educational experience and the success of learning lies in the potential for discoveries and ways of thinking. It will make children feel confident in their ability to engage and satisfy their curiosity (Soler & Miller, 2003). The Reggio approach does not require children to be prepared for primary school. However, they create a strong learning environment that encourages curiosity, creativity and collaborative learning (Maynard & Chicken, 2010). In this environment, a strong image is developed of the Reggio child as a strong, confident, competent and capable learner. Children are well equipped to make the transition to the next stage of their education.

5. Preparing for Primary School Requires Moving away from Schoolification

Moss (2013) refers to a view of education in his book to explain the phenomenon of schoolification. In order for education to achieve efficiency and equity within a short time, policymakers believe that it is necessary to precise and predetermined performance standards at each stage of the process and use effective techniques to achieve these standards (Ang, 2014). These criteria must be used to assess children's achievements. In this situation, each aspect of the education system must aim to prepare students for the next stage of progress. This conception of education is highly instrumental in reason, highly regenerative and communicative in pedagogy, and highly technical in practice. Ultimately, ECE is locked into a system that expects children to meet a set of prescribed standards. In order to meet these standards, an increasing number of kindergarten teachers are using worksheets to teach early literacy and mathematics, attempting to respond to the educational stress placed on parents and society by getting children to meet the expected standards perfectly (Genishi & Dyson, 2012). It leads to ECE becoming a preparatory school, and this phenomenon is referred to as schoolification (Ang, 2014). Furthermore, it also culminates in ECE becoming an outcome-oriented curriculum for young children that only focuses on formal or academic skills in preparation for the next stage of education.

Some experts argue against only paying attention to academic skills because they concern that it will turn ECE into a preparatory school, weakening the value of the early years. Their worries have been confirmed. Early education institutions and parents are paying increasing attention to children's academic preparation for school, influenced by this purpose (Ang, 2014). In an attempt to measure the children's academic level, preschools widely apply assessment (a method used to measure children's academic level and learning achievement) to ECE. Scholars in this field believe that EYFS increasingly emphasises educational achievement, assessment and learning objectives, thus devaluing the significance of the early childhood experience (Lloyd,2015). ECE institutions can use assessment to support children's development, however, Genishi (2012) warned against using the assessment as a screening tool to divide children into different ability groups (McLean, 2010). If early childhood institutions rely excessively on the assessment, it will quickly result in schoolification of ECE (Genishi, 1992).

Not only early education institutions but also parents pay more attention to cultivating their children's academic ability in order to prepare for primary school. In 2013, an article in 'The Times' reported that parents began to hire private teachers for three-and four-year-olds in order to help their children prepare for primary school, and they wish to help their children to acquire good grades in the primary school entrance examinations (The Times, 2013). Another article posted in Singapore's 'The Straits Times' entitled 'One Child, Two Schools', describes local families' daily life: parents send their children to two different schools to learn different courses every day to make their children stand out from the fierce competition (The Times, 2013). During an interview, a

kindergarten leader stated that it is not unusual for a child to attend two schools simultaneously (The Straits Times, 2012). He indicated that parents are increasingly afraid of losing, therefore, they hope their children could prepare for primary school. All these newspapers reveal that early education is in a system dominated by the free market, and the neoliberal principle is dominating the education system (Heckman, 2010). A highly developed 'hothouse' environment driven by parents and social needs has been maintained (The Straits Times, 2012). In this environment, parents become the epitome of Moss' (2013) description stating 'parents are consumers'. Early education service is regarded as a private commodity, and parents are buying this service as consumers to help their children stand out from the fierce competition (Moss, 2013).

The emphasis in ECE on 'prepare' refers to helping children make a smooth transition to the next stage of their education and emphasises continuity in education (Petriwskyj & Tayler, 2005). However, it is beginning to change as it is integrated with practice. A substantial number of policymakers recognise the economic value of investing in early education (Neaum,2016). They sought to promote the creation of a unified standards-based system of early education that defined readiness through a specific set of learning experiences that children would engage in to be prepared to achieve the academic success expected at the primary school level (Brown, 2010). A report by United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) compares different models of ECE and indicated that 'schoolification' is a 'high risk' for all education systems (UNESCO,2010; Ang, 2014). The purpose of ECE cannot be narrowly understood, focusing on academic skills. Different stages of education require continuity, but this does not indicate a high reliance on assessment to achieve continuity. Teachers and policymakers should incorporate more pedagogical approaches for a smooth transition.

6. Early Years Foundation Stage

The Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) is a developmental guide for children (from birth to age five) developed by the Department for Education (Dfe, 2021). It aims to help teachers and ECE practitioners make accurate assessments of children's early developmental levels. It specifies that children need to learn in the seven major areas of early education, namely, communication and language, physical development, personal, social and emotional development, literacy, mathematics, understanding the world, expressive arts and design. Moreover, it has four fundamental principles: a unique child, positive relationships, enabling environments, and learning and development (Dfe, 2021). It aims to help children successfully transition to the next stage by assessing and setting development goals to improve their abilities. The immediate goal of EYFS is to help children develop social, language, and cognitive skills and prepare children for the next stage of their education (Dfe, 2021). High-quality ECE provides a foundation for children to develop their abilities and talents to the fullest. The EYFS outlines stage targets that all children need to achieve to ensure that children learn and develop, equip them with a wide range of knowledge and skills, and prepare them for school, setting them up for good progress in school and life (Brooks & Murray, 2016).

Another strategy in EYFS to prepare for primary school is to require teachers to submit an assessment to the Department of Education during the final term when children is five years old (Dfe, 2021). The teacher needs to use his or her expertise to professionally assess the children. Teachers are required to fill in a child's EYFS profile. This assessment aims to inform parents and practitioners of children's learning outcomes and abilities and whether they are meeting expectations. Another purpose is to demonstrate to first-grade teachers the level and strengths of children in preparation for the next school year. It facilitates a dialogue between the teacher and the first-grade teacher about the child's level of development and learning needs. It helps to assist first-grade teachers in planning children's curriculum and activities and aids the child to make a successful transition to the next level of learning. However, it is also prone to the risk of schooling. The initial purpose of assessment in ECE is to help teachers plan to learn resources and arrange the most appropriate daily activities and lessons for children. Teachers use the assessment results to formulate and provide the best experience and teaching for the children and obtain the children's continuous progress. Assessment exists to guide teachers' professional judgment, not to replace teachers' professional judgment (Ang., 2014). However, parents and teachers are prone to the risk of schooling in pursuit of assessment scores or transitioning to outcome-oriented assessments.

7. Comparing the Reggio Approach and EYFS

Reggio Emilia approach does not follow the national curriculum framework or other formal curriculum policies (Chicken, 2022). It represents a localised, learner-centred approach to teaching and learning as an alternative to a centralised national curriculum. Reggio Emilia approach is free from stress from instrumental and career-oriented views of curriculum, learning and teaching. In this approach, children are regarded as active constructors of knowledge, and teachers are perceived as collaborators and co-learners with children, whose role is to guide, facilitate and encourage (Boyd & Bath, 2017). It strongly rejects meeting any pre-specified or age-related goals and expectations. It believes that children's potential is hindered when their learning endpoints are set in advance. The EYFS contrasts with the Reggio approach. The children are considered future students in

EYFS. It leads to curriculum content that emphasises subject-related learning objectives and culminates in practitioners feeling the need to prepare children for school through a more formal approach to teaching and learning (Wall, 2015). In contrast, at Reggio Emilia, children are viewed as strong partners who actively co-construct the content of the curriculum with more competent teachers, and their peers. The EYFS is a centralised, competency-based curriculum system that pre-establishes and prescribes national educational goals and content. Reggio Emilia approach offers an alternative perspective, as it perceives the centralised, directive approach as hindering children's potential by formulating their learning in advance. These two examples can be described as two ends of a continuum. Pedagogy is a teaching method or philosophy of education used by teachers in education, and it is constantly changing according to the shape and needs of society (Kemp et al., 2014). Reggio is a learner-centred curriculum and ECE system designed from the child's perspective. Children are perceived as unique individuals with rights. However, the EYFS is the British curriculum, and policymakers have integrated assessment into ECE. It is accompanied by fixed criteria and is an outcome-oriented preparation that results in the risk of schooling. Reggio considers the needs of children, and the EYFS, as the national curriculum considers not only the needs of children but also political and economic factors. In summary, both pedagogies reflect the need for early education to prepare children for the next stage of education. EYFS is about helping children transition through pre-determined goals and using assessment to connect early childhood and primary school, teachers. In contrast, Reggio is regarding developing capable children who can make the transition through their own efforts. Teachers only act as facilitators to help children develop in Reggio classroom.

8. Conclusion

This essay critically discusses the purpose of ECE by analysing international pedagogical perspectives. Firstly, for children, the purpose of ECE is to prepare for primary school. The preparation refers to successfully transitioning from ECE to primary school, not only focusing on academic skills. It discusses the need for transition based on situated learning. Situated learning theory demonstrates that children's learning occurs in a familiar environment. It indicates that children need to prepare for primary school in advance. Two-way preparation is required to help children make the perfect transition from ECE to primary education. This means that schools need to be ready for children, and children need to be ready for school. The preschool teachers need to find similarities between primary education and ECE. They can use play as a teaching tool to help children make effective transitions (Ronda, 2020). Primary schools also need to prepare a suitable environment to help children achieve transitions. The Reggio approach is child-centred, creating a suitable environment and providing resources for children to develop their creativity, independent thinking, collaboration and problem-solving skills. Reggio children can transition through their efforts in this environment. EYFS starkly contrasts Reggio, which helps children transition through pre-set goals and assessments. The benefit of assessment is that it can help teachers and parents understand the actual level of children. Teachers can provide appropriate assistance according to children's needs. At the same time, assessment can build a bridge between primary school and kindergarten. Primary teachers and schools can use this assessment to understand the children's actual needs, which helps schools and teachers adjust their arrangements to suit the children's development. However, excessive use and reliance on assessments can lead to the risk of schooling. Assessment is an outcome-oriented tool, and over-reliance on this tool can lead schools, parents and teachers to place an over-emphasis on developing children's academic skills and neglect other children's needs. Therefore, it needs to guard against the risks posed by schoolification. Finally, education cannot exist independently of society and the economy. The purpose of early education changes influences the needs of children and society. Early education has this purpose based on the current social environment and the needs of families.

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