



# A Study of the Philosophical Foundations, Academic Principles, and Curriculum Policy of Early Childhood Education

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**Abstract:** This study aimed to analyze the philosophical foundations, academic underpinnings, and policy directions of Early Childhood Education (ECE) curriculum in China and compared them with Indonesia's ECE framework. The study employed a systematic literature review approach to identify and synthesize scholarly sources, policy documents, and international academic publications related to early childhood education. The review process involved the stages of identification, selection, extraction, and synthesis of literature through thematic analysis and a comparative framework. The findings indicated that China's ECE curriculum was rooted in Confucian, Taoist, and Buddhist values that emphasized morality, social harmony, and emotional balance. Educational reform under China Education Modernization 2035 strengthened the integration of traditional values with pedagogical innovation and promoted play-based learning. In contrast, Indonesia's ECE curriculum was grounded in Ki Hajar Dewantara's philosophy and Pancasila values, which highlighted learner autonomy and holistic character development. The comparative analysis revealed that both countries faced distinct challenges: China dealt with early academic pressure and disparities in teacher quality, while Indonesia focused on improving teacher competence and equitable learning facilities. The study conclusion that the successful implementation of ECE curricula depended on policy consistency, professional teacher development, and collaboration between schools and families.

**Keywords:** Curriculum Early Childhood Education; Philosophical foundations; Systematic literature review

## Introduction

Early Childhood Education (ECE) serves as the fundamental stage for shaping children's character, social competence, and readiness for subsequent levels of education. In the global context, many countries have strengthened ECE policies to ensure children's holistic and optimal development (OECD, 2023; Warman et al., 2022). China has been among the countries that placed ECE as a strategic priority within its national education modernization agenda since the early twenty-first century, through efforts to integrate traditional

philosophy, progressive policy, and innovative learning practices (Agency et al., 2019).

Historically, China's ECE system has been strongly influenced by Confucian philosophy, which emphasizes morality, obedience, and social harmony (Hong & Howes, 2014). In addition, Taoist principles concerning balance, creativity, and harmony with nature have shaped learning approaches that respect the natural process of child development (Yang & Li, 2021). However, the dynamics of educational globalization have encouraged China to modernize its ECE curriculum through play-based learning, socio-emotional development, and experiential learning approaches as reflected in its national curriculum guidelines (Team, 2021; Yue et al., 2024). Long-term

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educational reform under China Education Modernization 2035 has strengthened ECE reforms aimed at expanding access, improving teacher quality, and promoting child-centered curriculum innovation. Nevertheless, implementation challenges persist, including disparities in teacher quality between regions and the prevalence of early academic pressure in urban schools (Hsueh et al., 2004; Jenny et al., 2024; Journal et al., 2023).

In comparison, Indonesia has developed its ECE curriculum based on the educational philosophy of Ki Hajar Dewantara, which emphasizes freedom in learning, moral character formation, and educational alignment with children's natural dispositions (Dewantara, 1935; Kemendikbudristek, 2022). The Merdeka Curriculum and National Standards for ECE highlight play-based learning as a core pedagogical strategy rather than a mere recreational activity (Kementerian Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan, 2020; UNICEF, 2022). Furthermore, recent research in Indonesia has redefined the concept of play as a medium for fostering children's independence, creativity, and social competence (Alfaeni & Kurniati, 2023).

Although several studies have discussed the implementation of ECE policies and learning practices in China and Indonesia, most of them have been partial, focusing on pedagogical aspects or learning outcomes. Comprehensive studies that analyze the relationships between philosophical foundations, national policies, and curriculum implementation remain limited particularly within cross-national comparisons across Asian contexts with distinct cultural roots. Moreover, the phenomenon of hybridization between local values and global influences in ECE curriculum policies has rarely been examined systematically, despite being a key feature of contemporary educational reform (OECD, 2023; Yue et al., 2024).

This study offered novelty by comparatively analyzing the philosophical foundations, policies, and curriculum practices of ECE in China and Indonesia to highlight how local values are adapted to address global challenges. It also emphasized the integration between pedagogical innovation and local wisdom as the basis for developing curricula that are relevant to contemporary needs. Therefore, this research was expected to provide conceptual contributions to the field of comparative education and enrich the discourse on ECE curriculum reform that seeks balance between cultural values and global demands.

## Method

This study employed a systematic literature review (SLR) approach to analyze the philosophical

foundations, academic principles, and curriculum policy of Early Childhood Education (ECE) in China (Munib & Wulandari, 2021). This approach was chosen because it effectively synthesized a wide range of scholarly information, policy documents, and relevant research findings to provide a comprehensive understanding of ECE curriculum dynamics within both national and comparative contexts (Pan & Li, 2016; Yang & Li, 2021).

The concept of a systematic literature review, as described by (Snyder, 2019), emphasizes a structured, transparent, and replicable research process for identifying, evaluating, and synthesizing previous studies. This methodology provided a foundation for theory development and policy formulation through evidence-based synthesis. (Xiao & Watson, 2019) highlighted that an SLR must follow a rigorous sequence of stages – planning, searching, selecting, analyzing, and reporting – to ensure validity and traceability of results. In educational research, (Torraco, 2016) explained that the integrative literature review model allows researchers to combine multiple perspectives and generate new conceptual insights into the studied phenomena.

The data sources consisted of government policy documents, curriculum guidelines, reputable journal articles, and international academic publications related to ECE in China. The primary data were drawn from China Education Modernization 2035, which emphasized educational transformation including early childhood education (Council, 2019), the Kindergarten Education Curriculum Guide from Hong Kong, and curriculum frameworks from international educational institutions in China (Team, 2021). Additional literature was reviewed to deepen understanding of historical contexts, learning practices, and policy reform directions in ECE, including studies that discussed curriculum hybridization and the influence of globalization on the ECE system (Yue et al., 2024; Yang & Li, 2022).

The review process was carried out through four main stages:

1. Identification of credible literature through relevant databases.
2. Selection of documents based on inclusion criteria, including topic relevance to ECE in China, source credibility, and publication recency.
3. Extraction of key data covering educational philosophy, national policy, and curriculum implementation practices.
4. Synthesis of literature findings using thematic analysis and a cross-national comparative framework to produce a comprehensive understanding that considered multi-level contexts such as location, demographics, and socio-educational dimensions (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Bray & Thomas, 1995).

This methodological framework aligned with international practices in comparative educational policy research that emphasized source triangulation and conceptual validity in evaluating curriculum models (Sugiyono, 2021).

## Result and Discussion

### *Philosophical Foundations of the ECE Curriculum in China*

The philosophy of education in China was deeply rooted in the classical values of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism, which shaped both the moral character formation and the direction of national education. Confucianism emphasized morality, social harmony, and respect for teachers as models of virtue in early childhood learning processes (Hong & Howes, 2014; Ruhai et al., 2024). Taoist teachings highlighted balance between humans and nature and stressed the importance of allowing children's natural development without excessive external pressure (Ding et al., 2024).

Buddhism enriched the educational perspective in China by embedding values of empathy, self-awareness, and inner peace, which became integral to mindfulness practices in early childhood learning (Kauka, 2018). The combination of these three philosophies positioned the Chinese ECE curriculum toward moral development, emotional balance, and social order.

In the modern era, the Chinese education system began integrating global values and constructivist approaches to align with twenty-first-century learning needs. Curriculum reform emphasized creativity, communication, collaboration, and critical thinking as core competencies from an early age (Fan, 2024; Tian et al., 2022). Recent findings revealed that local cultural values remained essential in modern ECE practices. (Fu et al., 2024) highlighted that child development perspectives in China reflected an integration between Confucian cultural heritage and contemporary socio-cognitive demands, reinforcing the argument for value hybridization within the curriculum.

### *Policy Framework and Curriculum Documents in Chinese ECE*

Since the launch of the Education Modernization 2035 policy, the Chinese government had shown strong commitment to expanding access, improving teacher quality, and aligning early childhood curricula with the nation's social and economic development (Chen et al., 2024; Jiang et al., 2021). These reforms reinforced child-centered education principles, balancing cognitive, socio-emotional, and moral development, while strengthening the notion of learning through play (Yue et al., 2024).

Despite these efforts, the implementation of reforms encountered significant challenges. Educational disparities between urban and rural regions remained wide, and teacher professionalism varied greatly across provinces (Li et al., 2023; Peng et al., 2022a). In addition, academic pressure at an early age persisted as a major issue that hindered the full realization of developmentally appropriate practices (Huana & Woo, 2022).

Recent literature emphasized that the success of ECE reform depended heavily on strengthening teacher capacity. Chen et al., (2024) argued that without continuous professional development and institutional support, the reform agenda would fail to achieve its intended goals. Furthermore, Yang, (2023) proposed that curriculum-based professional learning could serve as an effective mechanism to bridge the gap between policy expectations and classroom realities.

### *ECE Teaching Practices in China*

In practice, early childhood teaching in China continued to show discrepancies between policy ideals and classroom realities. Although official documents emphasized play-based learning, many institutions still prioritized early academic drills due to competitive pressure toward primary school admission (Journal et al., 2023; Qi & Melhuish, 2016).

Recent developments, however, demonstrated a paradigm shift toward more exploratory and participatory learning. New research showed that play-based curricula had been increasingly implemented, particularly in major cities such as Shanghai and Beijing, through thematic activities combining creative exploration, group collaboration, and social reflection (Yue et al., 2024).

Empirical evidence presented by Liu & Demetriou, (2025) showed that integrating play pedagogy into knowledge-based curricula supported children's socio-emotional development and improved emotional regulation. This trend indicated a new direction in Chinese ECE that balanced academic and affective dimensions of learning.

Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) among ECE teachers also contributed to pedagogical innovation by promoting collaboration in planning, implementing, and evaluating classroom activities (Peng et al., 2022). Such practices reflected the growing adaptability of China's ECE system, positioning teachers and children as active participants in the learning process.

### *Comparative Perspectives on the ECE Curriculum in China and Indonesia*

When compared, China's ECE curriculum demonstrated strengths in structured policy implementation and moral discipline, while Indonesia

emphasized freedom in learning and holistic character formation. Both systems faced implementation challenges related to teacher quality and local contextual adaptation.

Cross-national studies by (Niu et al., 2024) revealed that each education system interpreted the concepts of play and meaningful learning differently, reflecting the cultural and policy orientations of each nation. These findings validated the relevance of comparing China and Indonesia, as both countries sought to integrate local values with global practices in their early childhood curricula.

#### *Comparative Summary of Key Findings*

Overall, the review demonstrated that both China and Indonesia aimed to balance traditional values with the demands of modernity in early childhood education. China exhibited strong policy stability and integration of moral philosophy into the curriculum, while Indonesia prioritized a humanistic approach that provided children with autonomy and experiential freedom.

Social, cultural, and policy contexts emerged as major factors shaping the distinct characteristics of each education system. A recent comparative study by (Niu et al., 2024) confirmed that national philosophical orientations directly influenced curriculum structure and pedagogical strategies in both countries. Within this framework, the Confucian philosophy in China fostered moral and social orientation, whereas Ki Hajar Dewantara's humanistic philosophy in Indonesia emphasized freedom and character formation.

In conclusion, the findings illustrated a pattern of value convergence, in which both nations adopted play-based learning as a universal approach to support children's social, emotional, and cognitive development despite their differing philosophical foundations.

## **Conclusion**

Based on the systematic literature review conducted, it was concluded that the Early Childhood Education (ECE) curriculum in China was built upon strong philosophical foundations rooted in the values of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism, emphasizing morality, social harmony, and balance in children's development. Educational reform under China Education Modernization 2035 demonstrated the government's efforts to balance traditional values with the demands of modernization through the implementation of play-based learning, improvement of teacher professionalism, and integration of educational technology into early childhood instruction.

In contrast, Indonesia's ECE curriculum was grounded in the philosophy of Ki Hajar Dewantara and

the values of Pancasila, which emphasized freedom in learning, character formation, and holistic child development. The comparative analysis revealed that China faced challenges in reducing early academic pressure and addressing disparities in teacher quality, while Indonesia focused on ensuring educational equity, strengthening teacher competence, and improving the availability of adequate learning resources.

Based on these findings, policymakers and ECE administrators in Indonesia are encouraged to adopt best practices from China's curriculum framework, particularly in ensuring policy consistency, strengthening teacher training systems, and promoting a balanced learning model that integrates both academic and socio-emotional development. Educators at the institutional level are expected to continue developing child centered learning approaches that prioritize meaningful play experiences. Furthermore, collaboration between families and schools needs to be continuously reinforced to create holistic learning environments aligned with the goals of early childhood character education. Future research is also needed to explore curriculum implementation across diverse regional contexts to provide empirical insights for developing more adaptive and contextually relevant education policies.

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#### **Author Contributions**

Main author and article researcher, L.W.K; collected information, L.W.K; created instruments to measure needs and responses, L.W.K; conducted validation assessments by subject matter experts and media experts, L.W.K; created evaluations, L.W.K; developed and tested the research product, L.W.K; data processing and initial article writing, L.W.K; research and writing of the second article, R. H & M.A.N conducted validation of the instruments and initial product design before submission to media and subject matter expert validators, R.H & M.A.N; supervising lecturers who guided and mentored the first author, E.T.W & H.

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#### **Conflicts of Interest**

The authors declare no conflicts of interest

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