



CHILDHOOD, CARE AND LEARNING: INTERPRETING ECCE THROUGH INDIAN AND WESTERN LENSES

Laxman Bauri 

RESEARCH ARTICLE



Author Details:

Research Scholar, Department of Education, Sidho-Kanho-Birsha University, Purulia, West Bengal, India

Abstract

Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) plays a vital role in promoting the holistic development of children through meaningful, child-centred, and experiential learning. This review explores the significant contributions of three influential thinkers, Friedrich Froebel, Maria Montessori, and Rabindranath Tagore, and interprets their relevance to contemporary ECCE. The reviewed literature indicates that Froebel emphasized play, self-activity, nature, creativity, social interaction, and learning through Gifts and Occupations. Montessori focused on independence, practical-life activities, sensory learning, self-directed learning, and the development of cognitive, motor, social, and problem-solving skills. Tagore emphasized freedom, creativity, nature-based learning, music, art, literature, and holistic personality development. The literature further suggests that these approaches continue to influence contemporary early childhood practices and support children's cognitive, physical, social, emotional, and creative development. However, challenges related to teacher competence, resources, parental understanding, assessment practices, and contextual adaptation remain important considerations. Overall, the review suggests that integrating the complementary principles of Froebel, Montessori, and Tagore can provide a meaningful foundation for joyful, inclusive, child-centred, activity-based, and holistic development.

Corresponding Author:

Laxman Bauri

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Introduction

Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) is a fundamental stage of human development that lays the foundation for children's physical, cognitive, emotional, social, and moral development. Early childhood is characterized by rapid growth, curiosity, exploration, and habit formation. Childhood should be viewed as an important stage of life rather than merely preparation for formal schooling. ECCE provides children with care, protection, meaningful learning, and opportunities for holistic development. Care includes nutrition, health, safety, emotional security, affection, and responsive relationships. A caring environment helps children develop confidence, independence, trust, and a positive sense of self. Learning during early childhood naturally occurs through play, interaction, observation, exploration, and creative activities. Storytelling, music, movement, and creative activities further enrich children's learning experiences. Effective ECCE integrates care and learning as interconnected aspects of child development. Contemporary ECCE recognizes children as active learners with diverse interests, abilities, and experiences. Child-centred and play-based approaches encourage children's active participation in learning. Froebel, Montessori, and Tagore emphasized freedom, play, activity, nature, creativity, and holistic development. NEP 2020 recognizes ECCE and foundational learning as essential components of the Indian education system. Therefore, meaningful ECCE should provide nurturing, inclusive, joyful, and stimulating environments for every child's holistic development.

Expanding beyond these foundational pioneers, the developmental and pedagogical discourse of ECCE is further enriched through complementary eastern and western philosophies. Jean-Jacques Rousseau laid the groundwork for naturalism by asserting that childhood holds intrinsic value and must unfold freely according to nature's laws (Rousseau, 1762/1979). Concurrently, Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy of *Pre-Basic Education* situated early care within experiential, community-rooted environments, emphasizing the balanced harmony of head, heart, and hand (Gandhi, 1951, 1962). In parallel, Sri Aurobindo envisioned an *Integral Education* that respects the child's innate soul and psychic growth without authoritarian imposition, fostering spontaneous self-evolution (Ghosh & Saha, 2024; Saha & Maji, 2013). Synthesizing these perspectives, Lev Vygotsky

bridged individual exploration with social mediation, demonstrating that collaborative play, language, and responsive caregiver scaffolding serve as pivotal catalysts for socio-cognitive maturation (Vygotsky, 1967, 1978).

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative literature review approach to explore the contributions and contemporary relevance of Friedrich Froebel, Maria Montessori, and Rabindranath Tagore to Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE). The study was based on a review and thematic analysis of relevant research articles, books, scholarly papers, and other academic literature related to the educational philosophies and practices of the three thinkers. The reviewed studies mainly focused on child-centred education, play-based learning, self-activity, practical-life activities, sensory learning, creativity, nature-based learning, freedom, music, art, social interaction, and holistic child development.

Review of Related Literature

Studies Related to Friedrich Froebel

Tang and Corrado (2025) explored the role of music in supporting young children's holistic learning and wellbeing through Froebel's Mother Songs. The study emphasized the importance of broader musical experiences and a principled Froebelian approach to early childhood practice. Sakr and Kaur (2024) highlighted the Froebel's influence on early childhood education as a dynamic and changing process. The study suggested that examining Froebelian influence can encourage critical reflection on the past, present, and future of ECCE. Jana (2023) observed that Froebel's kindergarten education and its relevance to contemporary education. The study highlighted Froebel's influence on pedagogy and practice and emphasized individual self-development within a social environment. Cameron and Boyles (2022) explored tensions between Froebelian-informed pedagogy and contemporary quality standards. The study highlighted challenges arising from accountability, assessment, competition, school readiness, and neoliberal expectations in ECCE. Sen and Kotil (2022) highlighted the effects of Froebel Gifts on the geometric skills of 5-6 year-old children. The findings showed improvement in block construction, recognition of three-dimensional objects, and understanding of the properties of two-dimensional shapes. Johansson (2022) discussed curriculum and didactics in ECEC from a Froebelian perspective. The study focused on the relationships among the child, adult, content, play, and learning within contemporary early childhood curricula. Flemig and McNair (2022) explored Froebel's ideas concerning nature and nurture. The study emphasized that children develop through interaction with their environment and that natural environments provide valuable opportunities for learning and development. Aslanian et al. (2022) explored national and cross-national pathways of Froebelian early childhood education. The study identified outdoor play as one of the most widespread continuing elements of Froebelian pedagogy, while noting declining opportunities for children to engage with nature. McNair and Powell (2021) revisited Froebel's educational philosophy and highlighted self-activity, play, relationships, nature, and holistic development. The study suggested that Froebel's ideas remain relevant to contemporary ECCE. Shirakawa and Saracho (2021) reviewed the historical development and spread of Froebel's kindergarten movement in Germany and the United States. The study highlighted the importance of play, activity, interaction, and educational materials in Froebel's kindergarten system. Nojiri (2020) explored the historical use of Froebel Blocks in Japanese early childhood education. The study showed that Froebel's Gifts supported children's manipulation, construction, exploration of shapes and patterns, and learning through direct experience. Hoskins and Smedley (2018) discussed the importance of learning through play in contemporary ECCE. The study emphasized play, creativity, exploration, relationships, and self-expression, while identifying challenges created by school-readiness and formal learning demands. Roszak (2018) explored the revival of Froebel's pedagogical ideas in Polish preschool education. The study found that the "Gift of Play" is being adapted to modern conditions, resulting in the development of more Froebel-inspired preschools. Smedley and Hoskins (2018) explored practitioners' understanding and implementation of learning through play. The study found that Froebelian theory provides a useful framework for understanding play as a means of exploration, communication, idea development, and meaning-making. Park and Yang (2016) discussed the continuing influence of Froebel's kindergarten system in the USA and South Korea. The study found that play-based learning, child-centred education, nature, hands-on activities, creativity, and holistic development continue to influence contemporary ECCE, although Froebelian ideas have been adapted to different cultural contexts. Manan (2015) discussed Froebel's educational thought and its significance for early education. The study emphasized the educational value of play, non-book materials, freedom, individual pace, and a child-friendly learning environment. Baidya et al. (2014) theoretically explored Friedrich Froebel's educational thoughts and found that his philosophy emphasized child-centred education, self-activity, play, social interaction, creativity, and experiential learning through Gifts and Occupations. The study highlighted Froebel's contribution to the foundation of modern early childhood education.

Beyond the studies mentioned above, other prominent researchers have conducted research related to Froebel, such as –McNair et al. (2022); Castner and Maron-Puntarelli (2022); MacLure and MacRae (2022); Watts (2022); Josephidou and Kemp (2022); and Wasmuth (2022).

Studies Related to Maria Montessori

Ahmad Muhid et al. (2025) explored that Montessori curriculum can support children's developmental progress across different domains. It also emphasized teachers' competence and parents' positive recognition as important factors in effective ECCE implementation. Chhetri (2024) found that Montessori education supports positive attitudes toward learning, practical-life skills, sensory-motor development, language, observation, and social interaction. It also promotes independent learning among nursery children. Ngoc (2023) highlighted that Montessori practical-life activities support fine-motor skills, independence, and self-

discipline. These activities contribute to children's overall development during the early years. Demangeon et al. (2023) found that generally positive effects of Montessori education across several developmental and learning domains. The findings support Montessori education as a potentially effective approach in ECCE. Atis-Akyol et al. (2023) highlighted that Montessori classrooms generally reflected Montessori principles and provided appropriate materials. Teachers nevertheless reported challenges related to class size, cost, time management, and parental knowledge. Kocabas and Bavli (2022) observed that Montessori teachers generally communicate respectfully and guide children during learning. However, some difficulties occur during conflicts and challenging behaviours. Basargekar and Lillard (2021) explored mathematics achievement in Montessori education. The findings showed inconsistent advantages over conventional education, indicating the need for further research. Kiran et al. (2021) found that positive effects of Montessori education on cognitive, language, social, motor, creative, and emotional development. The study recommended more qualitative and process-oriented research in ECCE. Lillard (2021) explored that high-fidelity Montessori education can provide a developmentally appropriate and academically effective alternative to conventional ECCE. It emphasizes independence, active learning, and holistic development. Kusumawardani et al. (2020) found that significant improvement in gross-motor development following Montessori intervention among children aged 3-5 years. The study supports the use of Montessori activities for physical development in ECCE. Guven et al. (2020) highlighted that Montessori preschool children demonstrated better Sudoku-solving skills than children following the national programme. The findings suggest benefits for children's problem-solving abilities. Yildiz and Cagdas (2019) explored that Montessori training for mothers improved children's mathematics skills. The study highlights the importance of parental involvement in ECCE. Ongoren and Yazlik (2019) observed that Montessori-trained preschool children performed better in several mathematical concept skills. The findings demonstrate the value of hands-on learning for early mathematical development. Izuagba et al. (2017) explored caregivers' knowledge of Montessori and other ECCE approaches. The findings highlighted the importance of teachers' and caregivers' knowledge for effective early childhood education. Lillard et al. (2017) observed that Montessori preschool education improved academic outcomes and reduced some achievement differences between socioeconomic groups. This highlights its potential contribution to equitable ECCE. Faryadi (2017) explored that Montessori education improved mathematical proficiency, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills among kindergarten children. The findings support activity-based learning in ECCE. Lillard and Heise (2016) highlighted that the use of authentic Montessori materials improved early reading and executive function outcomes. The study emphasizes the importance of appropriate learning materials in ECCE. Laski et al. (2016) found that some advantages for Montessori children in base-10 representation and arithmetic strategies. However, no consistent difference was found in overall arithmetic accuracy. Kayili and Ari (2016) explored that Montessori education supported children's understanding of feelings and social problem-solving. The study highlights its contribution to social-emotional development in ECCE. Kayili (2016) observed that Montessori education reduced errors and increased reflection time among kindergarten children. The findings indicate positive effects on children's cognitive development. Mallett and Schroeder (2015) compared academic achievement among Montessori and non-Montessori children. The findings showed similar achievement in some grades and advantages for Montessori children in some later reading and mathematics outcomes. Dogru (2015) observed that Montessori education improved attention-gathering skills among preschool children. Sensory materials and active learning helped improve children's concentration and engagement. Bhatia et al. (2015) highlighted Montessori practical-life activities and found their importance in developing fine-motor and eye-hand coordination skills. These activities contribute to children's physical and functional development. Ahmadpour and Mujembari (2015) found that higher IQ levels among five-year-old children educated through the Montessori approach. The study indicates that Montessori activities can support cognitive development in ECCE. Bahmaee et al. (2016) explored that Montessori preschool education promotes independence, self-confidence, sensory learning, and hands-on activities. These features support holistic development in ECCE. Pate et al. (2014) observed that children in Montessori preschools were more physically active than children in traditional preschools. The study highlights the importance of physical activity for healthy development during early childhood. Byun et al. (2013) explored that children attending Montessori preschools showed lower sedentary behaviour. The findings suggest that Montessori education can encourage active participation and physical development in ECCE. Tahir et al. (2013) compared Montessori and kindergarten systems of early childhood education. Both systems promoted activity-based learning and child development, while Montessori provided a more practical learning environment. Kayili and Kusecu (2012) explored that children receiving Montessori preschool education showed better social competence and school adjustment. The study highlights the importance of child-centred education for children's social development in ECCE. Lillard (2012) explored Montessori preschool education and found improvements in executive function, reading, mathematics, vocabulary, and social problem-solving. The findings show that Montessori education supports children's cognitive, academic, and social development in ECCE.

Beyond the studies mentioned above, other prominent researchers have conducted research related to Montessori, such as – Adhikari (2025); Koifman (2025); Mondal (2025); Adhikari and Saha (2024); Adhikari and Saha (2023); Saha and Adhikari (2023); Saha and Adhikari (2023); Saha and Adhikari (2023); Liu (2023); Liu and Tian (2023); Durdas (2023); Adhikari and Saha (2021); Adhikari and Saha (2021); Bhat (2021); Mavric (2020); and Peerzada and Basir (2019).

Studies Related to Rabindranath Tagore

Biswas (2026) explored Tagore's educational philosophy and its relevance to modern pedagogy. The study emphasized naturalism, creativity, activity-based learning and holistic development. These principles closely correspond with experiential and activity-based approaches in contemporary ECCE. Marshal (2025) explored Tagore's views on co-curricular activities. The study emphasized music, art, literature, social and creative activities for the holistic development of children. These activities

support the intellectual, emotional, social, moral and physical dimensions of ECCE. Singh (2023) compared Tagore's and Rousseau's ideas of child-centred education. The study emphasized education according to children's needs, interests and developmental readiness. Tagore additionally highlighted the importance of social relationships in children's development. Sarma (2023) highlighted the contemporary relevance of Tagore's educational philosophy. The study emphasized freedom, creativity, nature and holistic education. These principles are particularly relevant to ECCE, where children need opportunities for exploration and creative development. Akshaya (2023) explored the contributions of Indian philosophers to ECCE during the pre-independence period. The study highlighted Tagore's establishment of Santiniketan and his emphasis on developing children's intrinsic abilities. His approach focused on holistic personality development through a natural environment. Das (2022) highlighted Tagore's contribution to Indian education and emphasized creativity, curiosity and intellectual development. The study suggested that education should consider children's interests, needs, experiences and abilities. These principles support individualized and holistic ECCE. Shabbir and Mohanty (2022) explored the contributions of Tagore and Gandhi to early childhood education. They found that both believed children naturally want to learn and should explore their environment. Tagore also emphasized music, art and poetry for children's holistic development. Pareek and Sharma (2021) observed Tagore's educational philosophy and emphasized bringing children into contact with nature. The study suggested that natural learning environments help children understand the wider world. This approach has significant relevance to nature-based ECCE. Rani (2021) reviewed Tagore's educational philosophy and emphasized learning from nature, music and life. The study criticized rigid, examination-oriented education and supported freedom in learning. These principles are important for joyful and experiential ECCE. Sarkar (2021) highlighted Tagore's educational thoughts including self-education, self-realization, curriculum and holistic development. The study emphasized active participation and development of children's inner potential. These ideas are relevant to integrated cognitive, physical, social, emotional and creative development in ECCE. Kalpna (2019) explored the contribution of Tagore and Gandhi to early childhood education. The study found that both emphasized children's natural tendency to learn and the importance of learning from their environment. Their ideas support natural and child-centred approaches in ECCE. Mondal (2018) critically observed Tagore's educational perceptions and their implications for learners. The study emphasized freedom, self-development, natural learning and active participation. These principles support stimulating and child-friendly learning environments in ECCE. Ahmad Shah (2018) explored Tagore's contribution to education and his criticism of conventional schooling. The study emphasized freedom, exploration and learning in the natural environment. These ideas are important for creating child-centred ECCE environments. Debbarma (2017) highlighted Tagore's educational thoughts in the present context. The study emphasized intellectual, physical, moral and aesthetic development according to children's needs, interests and abilities. It also highlighted thinking and imagination rather than dependence on memorization. Goswamee and Saikia (2017) explored Tagore's educational philosophy and its influence on elementary education. The study emphasized self-realization, nature and a supportive educational environment. These principles provide a foundation for holistic development in ECCE. Ghosh (2015) observed Tagore's ideas about child education, the learning environment and teacher-child relationships. The study emphasized natural surroundings, child-centred learning and understanding rather than rigid authority. These principles support child-friendly and experiential ECCE. Pritchard (2014) highlighted music, dance and arts education at Santiniketan. The study showed that artistic activities were important for children's self-expression, creativity and holistic development. These ideas are highly relevant to creative and activity-based ECCE.

Extending beyond the preceding literature, significant contributions to Tagore studies have also been made by researchers such as Sen and Saha (2026); Saha (2025); Das (2025); Chatterjee (2025); Sen (2022); Chinthakindi (2022); Mondal and Gayen (2021); and Saha and Maji (2012).

Critical Note

The reviewed literature on Froebel, Montessori and Rabindranath Tagore shows that all three thinkers made important contributions to the development of modern Early Childhood Care and Education. Their approaches strongly support child-centred education, learning through activity and experience, freedom, creativity, play, nature, social interaction and holistic development. Froebel emphasized play, self-activity, nature and learning through Gifts and Occupations. Montessori focused on independence, practical life activities, sensory learning, self-directed learning and the development of cognitive, motor, language and social skills. Tagore emphasized freedom, creativity, nature, music, art, literature and learning through real-life experiences. The literature also indicates that these educational philosophies remain relevant to contemporary ECCE. Froebelian studies show the continuing importance of play, outdoor learning, nature and relationships, while Montessori studies provide evidence of positive effects on cognitive, mathematical, motor, social-emotional and executive-function development. Tagore related studies highlight the importance of creative expression, natural environments, freedom and holistic personality development. Thus, the three approaches provide complementary perspectives for promoting children's overall development.

Conclusion

The study concludes that the significant contributions of Friedrich Froebel, Maria Montessori, and Rabindranath Tagore to early childhood care and education. The studies explore that Froebel's kindergarten philosophy emphasized play, creativity, self-activity, nature, and holistic child development, which continue to influence modern preschool education across different countries. Similarly, Montessori education has been widely recognized for promoting independent learning, cognitive development, social skills, problem solving ability, motor development, and child-centered learning through practical and activity-based methods. The reviewed studies also indicate that Montessori and Froebelian approaches positively support

children's academic achievement, creativity, social competence, and emotional growth. In the Indian context, Tagore's educational philosophy emphasized freedom, creativity, nature-based learning, co-curricular activities, and holistic development of children, which remain relevant in present day education policies and practices. Overall, the literature suggests that child-centered, activity-based, and experiential approaches play a vital role in ensuring the holistic development of children and continue to provide valuable guidance for contemporary early childhood education.

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