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Analysing the Impact of the School Curriculum on Children's Development and Learning

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Abstract

This study examines how school curricula shape child development, emphasising the roles of structured learning and outdoor play. The research seeks to understand how structured instruction in essential subjects like literacy, mathematics, and science fosters cognitive, social, and emotional development (Neaum, 2019). It also looks into the importance of outdoor play for enhancing children's physical and mental health (Moyles, Payler, & Georgeson, 2017). The research will focus on key research questions, such as the effects of structured learning on developmental advancement, the importance of outdoor play, and the differences in development outcomes between the EYFS and Montessori frameworks. By assessing the combined influence of these educational strategies, the research emphasises the significance of a balanced curriculum that includes structured learning and outdoor play to support comprehensive development (GOV.UK, 2024). This study illustrates how a carefully crafted curriculum facilitates developmental milestones and supports children's growth and educational success.

Keywords: School curricula, Children's development, Structured learning, Outdoor play, Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS), Montessori approach.

Introduction

The foundational years of a child's life are crucial for their intellectual, language, social, emotional, and physical development. During this period, educational experiences significantly influence their development and learning (Neaum, 2019). Early childhood education encompasses the learning and development that occurs before a child begins formal schooling, typically from birth to age eight, and plays an essential role in shaping these early experiences (Moyles. et al., 2017). The EYFS Framework outlines childcare facilities and schools' requirements for the education, growth, and care of children aged zero to five (GOV.UK, 2024). However, the Montessori method is an educational approach that emphasises self-directed learning and promotes child agency and independence within a structured environment (Montessori, 2018). I plan to examine how different educational methods, including structured and unstructured learning through outdoor play in schools, support various aspects of young children's development (Moyles et al., 2017). I chose to explore this topic due to its pressing importance in early childhood education, the growing focus on finding a balance between structured and unstructured learning, and my interest in how various curricula impact overall child development.

Research consistently indicates that the early years serve as a crucial phase for development, with experiences during this time having lasting implications for a child's overall well-being (Neaum, 2019). Therefore, the importance of this proposed inquiry resides in its ability to elucidate how various curricula influence child development, especially regarding the balance between structured learning and outdoor play. This inquiry also adds to the ongoing debates about the best practices in early childhood education. A key conflict in early childhood education is the role of outdoor play. Research shows that unstructured outdoor play enhances critical thinking, social skills, physical growth, and emotional regulation (Moyles. et al., 2017). However, increasing academic demands and standardised testing have led to declining outdoor play, favouring traditional classroom learning. Furthermore, this increase creates tension between academic instruction and play-based approaches, raising concerns about the best way to support children's holistic development (Neaum, 2019). Furthermore, I am composing this literature review to assist educators, policymakers, and parents in making well-informed decisions that promote children's overall growth concerning these discussions.

My paper focuses on these three research questions:

1. How does structured learning impact child development and learning?
2. How does outdoor play impact child development and learning?
3. What are the comparisons between the EYFS and Montessori?

Furthermore, to promote a balanced and impartial perspective, I will perform an extensive examination of various sources, including both supportive and critical viewpoints on Montessori, EYFS, structured learning, and outdoor play, which will assist me in obtaining a thorough understanding of the current research and in mitigating bias (Luciano, 2011). Furthermore, I will use organised and methodical analysis techniques, such as thematic analysis, to ensure that my conclusions follow specific, established criteria (Flick, 2018).

Method of Literature Review

The primary focus of my non-empirical research is a literature review that methodically investigates the current body of literature concerning structured learning, outdoor play, and the two educational frameworks—EYFS and Montessori. My literature review will be categorised thematically to respond to my chosen research questions specifically.

One significant strength of employing a literature review methodology in my research is its time and cost efficiency. This approach mitigates the necessity for conducting extensive primary research, such as surveys or interviews, allowing for a thorough analysis of existing studies and readily accessible evidence. Consequently, this conserves valuable time and resources and ensures a comprehensive exploration of the proposed research questions within the established academic discourse (Grant & Booth, 2009). Another advantage of using a literature review approach is that it provides a comprehensive overview of the existing research relevant to my study on how the curriculum supports child development through structured learning and outdoor play. Additionally, it allows me to compare the EYFS and Montessori frameworks. This review will establish a solid foundation for my research. A final benefit of conducting a comprehensive literature review is that it ensures the objectivity and transparency of my analysis. By carefully selecting and evaluating studies on outdoor play, structured learning, and the EYFS and Montessori systems, I can provide a solid and unbiased foundation for addressing my research questions.

Although literature reviews are beneficial and informative, they also have some limitations. Since my research relies on existing literature, my conclusions may be limited if many studies do not compare the specific effects of outdoor play contrary to structured learning (Luciano,2011). Additionally, suppose the literature does not adequately reflect recent advancements in the EYFS and Montessori systems. In that case, I may encounter situations where there is a lack of relevant information or where my questions are not explicitly answered (Luciano, 2011). Another limitation is the lack of primary data, as my study is non-empirical, which means I will not be using direct data-gathering methods such as observing children and educators or conducting interviews. As a result, I may have a limited understanding of the unique dynamics in these settings because I cannot observe or experience how children engage in outdoor play or structured learning environments (Flick, 2018). Therefore, I will rely on how other studies have documented and understood these phenomena. One main limitation of using the literature review approach is that there is currently an overwhelming amount of research available on child development, educational frameworks, and curricula, such as the EYFS and the Montessori method. Therefore, it can be challenging to sift through the vast number of papers and focus on the most relevant works for my specific research questions. Additionally, if my review is not well-structured and conducted with clear criteria, there is a risk of overlooking important studies (Machi & McEvoy, 2016).

Once I decided to focus my dissertation on the relationship between types of curricula and child development, I began to delve deeper into the thematic framework that would shape my research. My first step involved identifying overarching themes within this field, determining which informative sources could effectively support my study and how to access them efficiently. To locate these sources, I researched books, academic journals, and other pertinent literature addressing child development and curriculum design. I utilised various platforms, such as Google Scholar and Kortext, which are invaluable resources for academic research (Moyles. et al., 2017). Additionally, I maximised the offerings of my university's online library, which provided a broader range of databases and e-resources tailored to my field of study. Understanding that my research would rely heavily on thematic analysis, I established a focused approach by selecting specific keywords such as "child development," "curriculum," "educational outcomes," and "effective teaching strategies." This use of keywords helped to refine my search and hone in on literature that would be most relevant to my inquiry.

However, the search was not without its challenges. In the initial phase, I encountered numerous journals that, while insightful, were published in various countries and often did not align with the context of the UK curriculum. Acknowledging the importance of credibility and relevance in my dissertation, I set aside these sources to maintain the integrity of my work. Determined not to be deterred, I continued my exploration, meticulously assessing each piece of literature I encountered. This persistence ultimately led me to discover a range of valuable sources that provided rich insights and robust data for my dissertation. I created a centralised file containing all the helpful e-books and journals to facilitate my ongoing research and keep everything well-organised. This file included direct references and captured the the-

matic connections among the sources, making it easy for me to retrieve and integrate them as needed throughout my writing process.

One of the key strategies I employed while reading was to constantly relate the material to my own research subjects. I evaluated each article according to its relevance in addressing my questions about the impact of outdoor play, organised learning, and the distinctions between EYFS and Montessori approaches on human development. In conducting a comprehensive literature review, I meticulously assessed each study to ascertain its reliability and relevance. This process involved critically evaluating the study's methodology, the credibility of the publication source, and the author's qualifications. Additionally, I scrutinised the publication dates to ensure that the research reflected contemporary advancements in the field. By implementing these rigorous standards, I ensured that the literature incorporated into my study was both trustworthy and of the highest quality, thereby significantly enhancing the foundational framework of my research. Whilst reading, I systematically organised my literature review according to the various dimensions of my research, specifically focusing on the research questions and their relevance to topics such as structured learning, outdoor play, and comparative analyses between the EYFS and Montessori methodologies. In addition, I maintained up-to-date reading logs as my research advanced, allowing me to track emerging ideas, sources, and how my understanding evolved. I also revised my categories and reflections based on new insights concerning my inquiries.

My perspective significantly impacts how I approach the literature as a researcher, so I have chosen to concentrate on studies and theories that examine how structured learning and outdoor play affect child development.

Furthermore, research comparing various educational approaches, such as the EYFS and Montessori, to see how they affect child development particularly interests me. This emphasis enables me to carefully choose the most relevant sources to my research and ensures that the materials I examine are consistent with my investigation into how the curriculum impacts many elements of children's development and well-being. In addition to the fundamentals, I am curious to learn more about the intricate connections between different educational philosophies and child development. Additionally, I have improved my ability to integrate different points of view to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the topic, which has improved my analytical abilities. One of the key insights I have gained is recognising how my perspective as a researcher influences my evaluation of the literature, particularly when comparing frameworks like Montessori and EYFS.

Structured Learning and Child Development

Numerous factors influence a child's cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development during the complex and multidimensional process of child development (Berk, 2013). Among these factors, structured learning—a methodical, planned approach to education—plays a key role in fostering children's growth and development. The term "structured learning" describes an educational framework that usually occurs in a formal context, like a classroom, and consists of well-defined teaching methodologies, clear objectives, and a regular routine (McLachlan. et al., 2018). Siegler (2017) argues that structured learning environments help children grow by guiding them to develop knowledge and abilities.

Although each child's developmental path is distinct, studies indicate that structured learning provides several advantages that support optimal social, behavioural, emotional, and cognitive development (Arndt, 2012). Structured learning significantly influences children's development by offering a predictable setting with well-defined rules, routines, and learning objectives, ensuring that children acquire life and academic skills that will benefit them throughout their lives (Jensen, 2016). However, a thorough examination reveals that structured learning settings, while beneficial, also have limitations we should not disregard.

Cognitive Development and Structured Learning

As defined by Piaget (1952), cognitive development is how children acquire and enhance their language, reasoning, thinking, memory, and problem-solving abilities. Research shows that structured learning significantly improves cognitive abilities (Berk, 2013). In structured learning environments, thoughtfully designed curricula engage children by building on their existing knowledge, ensuring prior learning supports each new skill (Vygotsky, 1978). For example, children in early education start with basic literacy skills and gradually progress to more complex tasks, such as reading comprehension and critical thinking (Tudge & Rogoff, 1999).

The emphasis on consistency is one of the fundamental principles of structured learning. Establishing predictable routines, such as designated times for reading, math exercises, and physical activities, helps children concentrate on learning rather than struggle with uncertainty (Cohen & Sandy, 2019). This predictability allows children to focus, which is crucial for cognitive development, and to mentally prepare for the upcoming lessons (Jensen, 2016). Teachers can guide children through structured tasks and provide feedback that enhances their learning, allowing controlled environments to help children think in an organised way (Hattie, 2009). While these structured elements certainly contribute to cognitive development, a critical perspective argues that such rigidity can limit opportunities for creativity and independent thought (Ginsburg, 2007). For example, children may be less likely to solve problems independently or learn more flexibly, unguided in settings that emphasise strict adherence to routines (Ginsburg, 2007). Furthermore, structured learning environments often utilise active learning techniques that promote cognitive development. For example, interactive lessons, problem-solving exercises, and hands-on activities allow children to engage with the content in ways that enhance their understanding. However, a conflict arises: while active learning methods benefit children, the arrangement of the learning environment can sometimes limit their agency. This limitation arises when lessons and activities fail to accommodate different learning styles and interests adequately. Ryan and Deci (2000) suggest that children learn best when they have autonomy in their learning processes and that highly structured settings may compromise this autonomy.

Social and Emotional Development in Structured Learning Environments

In addition to promoting cognitive development, structured learning has a significant effect on a child's social and emotional development (Berk, 2013). Children's well-being depends on their sense of security, which can be given by the regularity and predictability of organised surroundings (Jensen, 2016). Children can better control their emotions and feel secure in their surroundings when they know what to expect each day (Cohen & Sandy, 2019). This stability is especially crucial for younger children still learning to handle complicated social situations. Moreover, structured learning environments contribute not only to emotional well-being but also to social growth (Piaget, 1952). Within these environments, children cultivate important social abilities like empathy, communication, teamwork, and conflict resolution by interacting with teachers and peers (Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology, 2018). Activities that involve group collaboration, such as joint problem-solving tasks, promote teamwork, idea-sharing, and peer learning. These experiences strengthen a sense of community and belonging, which is crucial for children's overall emotional health (Jensen, 2016).

Nonetheless, we must remember that while organised interactions can enhance social skills, the limitations of a managed setting may also restrict them. In these highly regulated environments, children frequently have fewer chances to engage with social dynamics beyond teacher-directed activities (Ginsburg, 2007). Moreover, social-emotional learning (SEL) programs, which specifically teach children how to control their emotions, comprehend the viewpoints of others, and form wholesome relationships, are frequently incorporated into structured learning environments (Elias et al., 1997). Studies have demonstrated that structured SEL programs can improve empathy, interpersonal bonds, and emotional control

(Durlak et al., 2011). However, a critical perspective argues that these programs' efficacy hinges on how well educators incorporate them into the more extensive educational system (Durlak et al., 2011). Furthermore, viewing SEL as an adjunct to the curriculum rather than a core component may decrease its potential impact.

Behavioural Development and Self-Regulation

The influence of structured learning on behavioural development is another important impact (Berk, 2013). Through regular routines, explicit expectations, and consequences for actions, structured environments help children develop positive behaviours. As teachers lead children through a planned day with time allotted for various activities and explicit rules in place, children come to understand the importance of self-discipline (Jensen, 2016). The development of self-regulation is one of the main goals of structured learning. The ability to control one's emotions, thoughts, and behaviours in various contexts is known as self-regulation, and it is an essential skill for success in and out of the classroom (Blanco, 2010). Children raised in structured learning contexts develop impulse control, time management skills, and attention to tasks. For example, a child who adheres to a set routine might learn to focus during class, move fluidly from one activity to the next, and show persistence when finishing assignments.

Even while these advantages are substantial, there are worries that the strictness of structured environments could cause stress or burnout, particularly for children who have trouble adjusting to the demands of a strict schedule or continual structure (Ginsburg, 2007). Furthermore, the focus on self-control and regulation may inadvertently suppress emotional expression or hinder children's ability to manage frustrating situations, both of which are critical for resilience development (Clausen. et al., 2015). Another crucial component of structured learning is the reward of constructive behaviour (Berk, 2013). Children learn what behaviours are appropriate and inappropriate when they see regular, predictable results from their actions. As time passes, this aids children in internalising proper conduct and growing in self-control, which assists them in social situations, at home, and in school. Over-reliance on outside reinforcement, however, runs the risk of impeding the growth of intrinsic motivation. Continuous external rewards for excellent behaviour may prevent children from internalising the beliefs and behaviours they are learning, making these behaviours less sustainable in the long term (Deci & Ryan, 1985).

Academic Success and Structured Learning

Possibly the most apparent and most researched effect is the connection between academic achievement and structured learning. A clear curriculum guides children in prioritising core skill development and provides consistent instruction in structured environments (Hattie, 2009); with this help, children are more likely to achieve academic goals and grow into very competent learners. Structured learning supports early literacy and numeracy development, giving children a solid basis for increasingly sophisticated abilities (Arndt, 2012). For example, children who grow up in a structured environment are more likely to acquire the skills necessary for future academic achievement, such as reading, writing, and basic mathematics (Siegler, 2017).

However, a critical examination of this emphasis on early academic achievement indicates that it might unintentionally put too much pressure on young students. Building curiosity, creativity, and a love of learning—all of which are equally important for long-term academic success—may be overshadowed by the focus on reaching milestones (Berk, 2013). Structured learning helps cultivate a growth mindset in children (Dweck, 2017). In well-structured settings, students gain regular feedback, motivating them to see challenges as opportunities for development instead of roadblocks. This method encourages a positive perspective on learning, leading children to understand that their hard work can result in progress. However, one possible downside is that students who find it challenging to meet set standards might

feel discouraged or neglected, particularly if they do not receive personalised support to meet their individual needs.

How does outdoor play impact child development and learning?

Outdoor play allows children to utilise various skills in natural and open environments, contributing to their overall growth (Moyles. et al., 2017). The significance of outdoor play in children's development has become a significant topic in educational and developmental psychology in recent years. Shin (2016) argues that outdoor play promotes children's social, emotional, cognitive, and physical development. Many believe outdoor environments create a unique atmosphere that fosters curiosity, active learning, and overall well-being (Aggio et al., 2017). Despite the general agreement on the positive effects of outdoor play, recent research is beginning to question the extent of these benefits and the contextual factors that may influence them (Spencer et al., 2019; Lannoy et al., 2023).

Physical development associated with outdoor play.

The benefits of outdoor recreation on physical health are among its most well-known advantages. Active mobility, which is encouraged by outdoor play, fosters the growth of strength, coordination, and gross motor abilities (Aggio et al., 2017). According to Tremblay et al. (2015), physical activities, including running, climbing, and leaping, are essential for enhancing general health and physical fitness. Additionally, outdoor settings, particularly natural areas, provide children with numerous opportunities for unplanned, spontaneous physical activity, which is often associated with lower childhood obesity rates (Spencer et al., 2019). Children who regularly play outside are less likely to participate in sedentary behaviours, such as spending excessive time on screens, which are associated with higher risks of obesity and other health issues, according to numerous research (Nigg et al., 2021; Predy et al., 2020). Additionally, the stimulus from the external environment—especially natural spaces—influences a child's sensory and motor skills. As they engage with the natural world, children exposed to various textures, sounds, and sights typically demonstrate improved sensory processing and more sophisticated motor skills (Grey et al., 2015).

However, critical viewpoints express concerns regarding the availability of outdoor play areas. Not every child has equal access to natural, safe spaces to play physically. Many children, especially those in socioeconomically deprived areas, are facing obstacles to playing outside due to urbanisation and the pervasiveness of technology in their lives (Spencer et al., 2019). There are fewer options for outdoor play for kids in low-income neighbourhoods since they frequently do not have access to secure parks or play areas (Flannigan & Dietze, 2018). Crowded urban locations or poorly maintained play areas may hinder children's physical development by creating unwelcoming or hazardous outdoor environments (Wiseman et al., 2019). Furthermore, designers often do not consider children's developmental needs when creating outdoor areas. Inadequate equipment, safety issues, and poorly designed layouts can significantly reduce the advantages of outdoor play (Spencer et al., 2019). Furthermore, parents and educators have also expressed concerns about the potential physical hazards of outdoor play, especially in settings that lack proper monitoring or safety measures. Although the advantages of physical activity are apparent, it is important to understand that playing outdoors might occasionally present physical hazards, such as injuries from falls, and that these risks must be balanced against possible benefits (Duflos et al., 2023). This is particularly true in settings with unattended equipment or where children have unsupervised access (Spencer et al., 2019).

Cognitive development in outdoor settings

The benefits of outdoor play for cognition are well known. Children are encouraged to play creatively, think critically, and solve problems in outdoor settings (Shin, 2016). Children learn critical cognitive skills,

such as memory, attention, and reasoning, through activities like exploring the natural environment or creating constructions out of natural materials (Pesce et al., 2016). Developmental theories state that children learn best when actively interacting with their surroundings through practical investigation. Such experiences are richly contextualised by outdoor play, which promotes creativity and cognitive development (Papadopoulos, 2021; Aggio et al., 2017). For example, a child who spends time outside might devise creative solutions to issues involving building a fort or navigating an obstacle course. Children are encouraged to think critically, plan ahead, and adjust to changing circumstances through these real-world obstacles (Aggio et al., 2017). According to research, playing outdoors encourages imagination and creativity, two mental skills necessary for innovation and problem-solving (Page et al., 2010). Children actively improve their cognitive flexibility when they play imaginatively outside, such as using a pile of rocks as a castle or pretending a stick is a magic wand (Page et al., 2010). These experiences enhance their ability to think abstractly, which is essential for success in various academic and practical contexts (Shin, 2016).

However, critical viewpoints point out that formal education systems, which are increasingly focused on academic accomplishment, frequently do not incorporate outdoor play (Cooper et al., 2010). In many educational settings, there is a tendency to prioritise classroom learning, such as literacy and numeracy, over unstructured play (Lannoy et al., 2023). Academic pressure, particularly in early childhood education, may lead educators to neglect outdoor play and disregard its cognitive advantages (Cooper et al., 2010). Direct instructional teaching in educational systems limits opportunities for unstructured outdoor play, hindering the development of critical cognitive skills that thrive in informal, exploratory settings (Pesce et al., 2016). Moreover, not all forms of outdoor play are equally beneficial to cognitive development. According to Spencer et al. (2019), children who play outside with little access to resources or without structured activities may not have the same cognitive advantages as those with access to well-designed, varied, and rich outdoor spaces that foster intellectual engagement. Furthermore, the degree to which outdoor play influences cognitive development can vary based on the nature of interactions with the surroundings. For example, a child who is left to play by themselves in an undeveloped region might not have the same opportunities or cognitive challenges as a child who participates in guided outdoor learning activities (Duflos et al., 2023).

Additionally, there is an ongoing debate about whether outdoor play can effectively meet the cognitive demands of today's rapidly changing world. While outdoor play promotes creativity and critical thinking skills, some critics argue that it may not adequately prepare children for the complex intellectual and technical challenges they will face in adulthood (Papadopoulos & Shin, 2021; Osaw & Papadopoulos, 2024; Lannoy et al., 2023). Outdoor play that primarily emphasises physical or exploratory activities might not provide the focused cognitive training necessary for success in modern, knowledge-based economies. Therefore, it is important to balance formal educational frameworks that target the academic skills required for future success with opportunities for outdoor play (Cooper et al., 2010).

Social and Emotional Development in outdoor settings

The contributions of outdoor play to social development are well known. Children can practise critical social skills, including cooperation, communication, and conflict resolution (Edmund, 2011), by participating in outdoor activities with their classmates (Pesce et al., 2016). Children learn to cooperate, negotiate, and comprehend the norms of society through shared play (Shin, 2016). These abilities are essential for controlling emotions and fostering healthy peer interactions. Children learn best in environments where they may engage with people, exchange information, and develop skills through collaboration (Aggio et al., 2017). Research indicates that positive interactions among children are often encouraged through outdoor play. For example, group outdoor games like tag or sandcastle building help develop cooperative and communication skills (Papadopoulos & Bisiri, 2020; Papadopoulos, 2020; Tremblay et al.,

2015). In outdoor settings, children have opportunities for spontaneous social interactions that may not occur in more structured environments, such as classrooms (Spencer et al., 2019). These encounters allow children to learn how to manage emotions like excitement, disappointment, and frustration, as well as understand social norms (Tremblay et al., 2015).

However, critical viewpoints bring forth issues regarding the social dynamics of outdoor play. Positive social consequences may not always result from outdoor play, especially if children lack the requisite social skills or if adults are not present to provide direction. Some children could be bullied or socially excluded when playing outside, particularly if they have trouble fitting in with other young people. Outdoor play areas can be daunting or alienating for kids who struggle with interaction. According to Wiseman et al. (2019), this is especially problematic in big or unstructured situations where adult supervision may be scarce. Furthermore, while playing outside might improve emotional health, it is vital to understand that different children react uniquely to various outside settings. Playing outdoors might make some children anxious or overwhelmed, especially if the surroundings are strange or seem threatening. For instance, intense sunlight, loud noises, or uneven ground can all be distressing for children with sensory processing conditions, making it challenging to enjoy and benefit from outdoor play (Oliver et al., 2022).

The role of nature and child development

One of the most prevalent claims in the literature on outdoor play is that nature benefits children's development. Specific theories suggest that people are inherently attracted to nature, and spending time in natural settings can positively impact emotions and cognitive function (Page et al., 2010). Research supports the idea that children who engage with natural environments tend to have longer attention spans, better moods, and overall improved mental health (Aggio et al., 2017).

Critical perspectives question whether the advantages of experiencing nature are universal. Not all natural environments promote positive effects equally; some may not provide a diverse range of stimuli needed for curiosity and cognitive engagement, or they could be poorly structured. Conversely, urban parks and outdoor spaces in cities often fall short of delivering the rich sensory experiences found in rural or wilderness areas, which may result in fewer significant interactions with nature (Grey et al., 2015). Additionally, many children, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, might not have access to the types of natural settings considered beneficial for their development, mainly due to socioeconomic obstacles in reaching quality natural areas (Spencer et al., 2019). Nature has many distinct developmental benefits; the quality of the outdoor environment has a noteworthy influence on its effectiveness. It is an unrealistic notion that nature can universally resolve issues related to child development (Grey et al., 2015). People create this notion when they believe that all outdoor settings, regardless of their quality, offer the same positive impacts.

What are the comparisons between EYFS and Montessori?

Educators now use the Montessori method and the EYFS as distinct educational approaches to foster young children's growth and development. Both approaches emphasise essential aspects of education, even though they differ in theory, instructional methods, and outcomes.

Theoretical Foundations

In accordance with the educational policies of the United Kingdom, the EYFS framework ensures that children from birth to the age of five receive an early education of the highest possible quality (GOV.UK,2024). It organises learning around seven key aspects: physical development, communication and language, emotional development, social development, and personal development. The EYFS is a

fundamental concept emphasising specific educational goals based on developmental milestones. This framework establishes a connection between the evaluation of child development and accepted standards (Wood, 2020). Moreover, critics argue that this regulated approach might unintentionally stifle children's natural curiosity and inventiveness since it gives too much weight to standardised learning objectives, which might not fully fit their particular developmental path (Nagaraj, 2016).

On the other hand, Dr. Maria Montessori developed the Montessori method based on the theory that children learn best in a prepared environment that encourages self-directed learning and discovery (Montessori, 2018). A key principle of the Montessori method is that children select their own activities within a structured environment. In contrast to the use of extrinsic incentives, this method of instruction encourages the development of natural drive (Phillips et al., 2022). Studies by Denervaud et al. (2021) and Duval et al. (2023) show that Montessori-educated students usually show higher cognitive flexibility, multidisciplinary thinking, and creativity than their peers who have received a traditional education. This open-ended approach has drawn criticism for perhaps lacking target-oriented guidance, which some teachers believe is necessary for structured learning (Marshall, 2017).

Curriculum and assessment practices

The EYFS establishes precise learning objectives and outcomes that teachers must adhere to while preparing the curriculum. Since all practitioners must adhere to these objectives, this systematic nature maintains consistency in educational quality across various settings (Wood, 2020). Despite this, using this strategy would make it more challenging for educators to cater to each student's specific requirements and preferences. According to a critical perspective, the EYFS may unintentionally promote a one-size-fits-all narrative that ignores considerable variances in children's developmental routes by emphasising uniformity (Wood, 2020).

Conversely, the Montessori method offers a more adaptable curriculum driven by the child's interests rather than predetermined developmental standards (Pate et al., 2014). Montessori classrooms intentionally use self-correcting educational tools to enhance experiential learning, which promotes active learning. According to Phillips (2022) and Byun et al. (2013), flexibility is a factor that encourages critical thinking and innovation. On the other hand, critics argue that while this adaptability is usually beneficial, inconsistent management can lead to gaps in fundamental skills. However, Children might not, for instance, have structured exposure to some crucial ideas even when Montessori settings foster autonomy (Mutmainna et al., 2024; Lillard & McHugh, 2019).

Teacher role and training

Moreover, the role of the teacher in both Montessori and EYFS systems is somewhat different from one another. The EYFS paradigm believes that teachers, following a set curriculum, are seen as guides helping students to reach particular learning objectives (Wood, 2020). This may result in effective scaffolding of learning, yet it may also cause teachers to feel pressured to achieve standardised results rather than emphasising attending to particular learners' needs (Wood, 2020).

Montessori teachers, on the other hand, assist children's self-directed learning when it is required by serving more as a guide or observer (Byun et al., 2013; Courtier et al., 2021). In order to fulfil this job, it is necessary to believe that children can direct their own educational experiences. Regarding training for educators, the Montessori method emphasises the concept of freedom within restrictions and a comprehensive grasp of child development. Critics counter that this passive attitude could make it difficult for teachers who are either inexperienced or unsure about how to effectively intervene, resulting in variances in the educational quality of various Montessori classrooms (Lillard, 2012; Ansari & Winsler, 2014).

Social and emotional development

In studies comparing students who attend Montessori schools to students who attend standard educational settings (Nagaraj, 2016), researchers have discovered that students who attend Montessori schools tend to have stronger social skills and participate more in their communities. Research has shown that Montessori students, for example, are more empathetic and have stronger social problem-solving abilities, leading to a greater sense of engagement in their learning environment (Courtier et al., 201). This is one of the reasons why Montessori students are so successful in their educational endeavours. On the other hand, Byun et al. (2013) and Pate et al. (2014) state that in the absence of the supervised social interaction typically associated with a structured program, it may be difficult for some children to manage group tasks successfully.

The EYFS framework, on the other hand, places a significant emphasis on developing personal, social, and emotional skills as a fundamental learning area, and it incorporates elements such as social communication and interaction (Wood, 2020). This planned increase in emotional competency aims to produce a complete approach to child development. However, critics argue that implementing these stricter guidelines may encourage children to conform to socioemotional norms rather than fostering genuine expression (Wood, 2020).

Creativity and Critical thinking

The ways in which Montessori and EYFS education influence critical thinking and creativity are intriguing points of comparison. Montessori methods emphasise allowing children to investigate and interact with objects at their own pace, which researchers have frequently associated with increased creativity (Denervaud et al., 2021; Byun et al., 2013). Research by Duval et al. (2023) and Wood (2020) indicates that Montessori-taught students have more cognitive flexibility and creative problem-solving abilities than those taught in environments thought to be traditional. Although Montessori restricts creative thinking, critics contend that this method might fail to equip children for strict workplaces that give compliance and standardise top priority above imaginative thinking (Marshall, 2017). Despite this, the EYFS model does include components that stimulate creative thinking, such as opportunities for creative inquiry and imaginative play.

However, given its focus on achieving specific learning objectives, critics argue that the approach may subordinate creativity to obtaining these results (Wood, 2020). Critics argue that instead of letting children explore freely, this can blend their creative expressions as they try to align their imaginative efforts with classroom criteria (Wood, 2020).

Empirical outcomes and long-term effects

Many studies have demonstrated that Montessori education enhances academic performance, particularly in fundamental skills such as literacy and numeracy (Mutmainna et al., 2024; Courtier et al., 2021). Phillips (2022) and Mutmainna et al. (2024) found that authentic Montessori students outperform their classmates in traditional settings on standardised examinations. Additionally, research indicates that Montessori education may have potential long-term benefits; students who get this type of education have improved in their social and emotional well-being as they transition into adulthood (Lillard et al., 2021). The efficacy of Montessori education, on the other hand, sometimes depends on how closely programs reflect accurate Montessori ideals, which is why it is necessary to adhere to strict implementation integrity (Pate et al., 2014; Lillard, 2012). Critics point out that this is the case.

Nonetheless, the EYFS asserts that it will increase children's readiness for education and learning throughout their lives, yet many argue that the emphasis on academic evaluation may overshadow chil-

dren's overall development (Wood, 2020). For a comprehensive analysis of the long-term effects of the EYFS approach against the Montessori method, additional study could be required (Wood, 2020).

Contribution to existing knowledge

In examining both the advantages and drawbacks of structured learning for child development, my study expands on already published research (Berk, 2013; Jensen, 2016). While verifying earlier results on its favourable effects on academic skills and self-regulation, my research also draws attention to critical issues like limited autonomy (Ryan & Deci, 2000) and decreased creativity (Ginsburg, 2007) in tightly controlled contexts. Combining both points of view helps the study progress our knowledge of balancing child-led exploration and structured learning (Siegler, 2017; McLachlan et al., 2018). The results imply that combining the advantages of structured learning with chances for self-directed learning could produce more efficient and adaptable early education methods.

Conclusion

In conclusion, my study emphasises the significant impact of school curriculum on children's development and illustrates that both structured learning and outdoor play have ideal but distinct functions in promoting cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development (Berk, 2013). It also contrasts Montessori methods with the EYFS framework, which assists the reader in seeing the advantages and disadvantages of self-directed and structured learning environments. Montessori promotes creativity, autonomy, and social competency, while EYFS provides consistency and academic readiness (Wood, 2020). The results support a balanced curriculum that emphasises readily available outdoor experiences, fits different developmental needs, and supports variable teaching approaches.

Although too much rigidity may stifle creativity and intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000), structured learning greatly improves children's cognitive, social, emotional, and academic development by offering defined objectives, predictable routines, and methodical instruction. This is enhanced by outdoor play, which promotes social-emotional development, problem-solving abilities, and physical health. However, unequal access (Spencer et al., 2019) and an excessive focus on academic courses can sometimes thwart its advantages. The EYFS framework ensures consistent learning milestones but may restrict individuality, whereas the Montessori method encourages independence and creativity but may lack structured skill-building (Lilliard & McHugh, 2019). Both approaches have advantages; Montessori supports long-term cognitive flexibility and social skills, while EYFS prepares children for formal education. In order to promote holistic development, an ideal strategy may combine Montessori-centred flexibility, outdoor play's exploratory advantages, and structured learning's academic rigour.

My research challenges some common assumptions in child development and education and offers a fresh perspective. For example, while many celebrate outdoor play, I examine whether it equally benefits all children—particularly those who are sensory-sensitive or live in unsafe environments—and whether it adequately prepares them for modern academic demands like tech literacy (Lannoy et al., 2023). In comparing EYFS and Montessori, I move beyond the usual either-or thinking, showing that structured approaches like EYFS can still foster creativity and that Montessori, while nurturing independence, may sometimes fall short in building academic skills (Lilliard & McHugh, 2019). Rather than simply critiquing existing models, I offer new insights by suggesting hybrid approaches that blend the strengths of structured and unstructured learning backed by research (Denervaud et al., 2021). My study also highlights equity issues, such as unequal access to quality outdoor spaces and inconsistencies in how educational models are applied (Lilliard, 2012). Furthermore, I aim to enrich—not reject—existing theories by proposing more nuanced, inclusive frameworks and encouraging future studies to test these ideas in practice.

Upon reflection, I could have investigated more closely on how various writers describe the essential concepts utilised in my study; this would have enabled me to better grasp how each of them views and uses these ideas in various circumstances. For example, analysing how different practitioners describe "outdoor play" would" have given me a more complex view, strengthening my critical analysis and raising the general calibre of my work. My positionality in relation to my research topic has not shifted drastically, but it has evolved. Having been taught primarily in structured learning environments, I felt more knowledgeable and familiar with that approach. However, after delving further into the concept of outdoor play, I have come to recognise that both structured learning and outdoor play have advantages and drawbacks. Therefore, I see both as equally applicable since they provide children with various but significant advantages for their development.

Moving forward, educators must implement classroom policies and structures to preserve children's freedom and autonomy in learning. Policymakers should thus give teachers continuous and appropriate training to help in this regard. Regarding future studies, schools might like to include parents through questionnaires or interviews to determine whether they think outdoor play or a structured educational setting is better for their children.

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