Early Childhood Education Programs from the Perspective of Islamic Philosophy of Education: A Comparative Study

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	Over the past three decades, the discourse surrounding transformative initiatives within Iran's educational framework has engendered significant scholarly interest, leading to the endorsement of numerous governmental decrees. Concurrently, the perceived inadequacies inherent in conventional educational systems have prompted an uptick in familial adoption of "Alternative Education" programs, mainly of Western origin. Despite their associated fiscal burdens, these alternatives' global proliferation and underlying ethos have appealed to certain Iranian families. However, exploring the philosophical elements, specific educational methods, societal contexts, and cultural nuances underpinning each approach and their implications for children residing in the distinct milieu of Islamic Iran remains paramount. This study delves into the philosophical foundations of three prominent Early Childhood Education Programs (ECEP) - Waldorf, Montessori, and Reggio Emilia - juxtaposed against the Iran Education Reform Documents (IERD) and their underpinning Islamic philosophy. Of particular concern is the discordance between these alternative educational paradigms and the imperative for modern children to integrate into formal institutions, highlighting potential educational challenges. Through qualitative inquiry and comparative analysis, the paper endeavors to elucidate the extent of alignment between these diverse educational approaches and Iran's indigenously claimed Islamic philosophy, offering insights vital for informed educational policy-making and practice, with implications for the holistic development of children navigating the intersection of varied educational ideologies within the Islamic Republic's educational landscape.

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1. Introduction

The latter half of the 19th century witnessed the nascent emergence of a modern Iranian educational system. This period saw the inauguration of Dar ul-Fonoun (House of Knowledge), a polytechnic institute established during the Qajar dynasty (1785-1925). This marked a pivotal shift from the traditional maktab, the primary Islamic school, paving the way for a more secularized curriculum. The Pahlavi dynasty (1925-1979) further accentuated the modernization project within Iranian education. However, this emphasis on rapid societal transformation, coupled with a formalistic approach and a perceived neglect of Islamic cultural heritage, rendered the system somewhat ineffective. Following the Islamic Revolution of 1979 and the subsequent establishment of the Islamic Republic, successive governments embarked on a comprehensive overhaul of the educational landscape. Given the revolution's inherent Islamic character and the nation's long-standing Islamic identity, Islamic principles became the cornerstone of this reformed system. The imperative for a comprehensive reform of the Iranian educational system has been a persistent theme for the past three decades. This urgency has manifested in creating numerous documents to establish a robust theoretical framework grounded in Islamic precepts. The culmination of this ongoing endeavor is a trilogy of Iran Education Reform Documents (IERD) between 2010 and 2012: the Theoretical Foundations of Fundamental Reform Document (TFFRD), the Fundamental Reform Document of Education (FRDE), and the National Curriculum Document (NCD). These documents emphasizing conformity with Iran's indigenous cultural heritage (Supreme Council of Education, 2010), are envisioned as the cornerstone for all formal pedagogical practices within the education system.

While the aforementioned theoretical framework emphasizes Islamic principles, a countervailing current exists within Iranian education. Some educational activists prioritize reform at the preschool and primary levels, advocating for alternative pedagogical approaches (Carnie, 2003). These approaches, often championed by informal and non-governmental groups, encompass programs like Waldorf, Montessori, and Reggio Emilia. Since these approaches do not have government support, at the time of writing, the authors did not have access to any statistics on the number of institutions that have officially declared their approach as one of these triadic approaches. Yet it is possible through internet search or social networks to know some of the centers that use these models as a basis for their work or institutes that offer teacher training courses (e.g. Alemi, 2015; Saeednia, 2018) . However, it is crucial to acknowledge that these Western-derived philosophies, while embraced by specific segments of Iranian society, present a potential point of tension in a system striving for cultural and ideological coherence.

However, adopting such alternative pedagogies in Iran presents a twofold challenge. Firstly, a potential incompatibility exists between these approaches and the mainstream educational system at the practical level. Many children who receive education through these non-traditional frameworks often move on to secondary schools, where they follow a more standardized curriculum. This abrupt shift can create significant learning obstacles for these students due to the pedagogical discrepancies (Gurantz, 2010; Lapon, 2020; Wilkinson et al., 2020). Secondly, a critical consideration lies in the philosophical compatibility of these Western-derived approaches with the Islamic philosophy of education. A thorough investigation into the degree of alignment between these frameworks and Islamic educational principles is necessary to ensure a cohesive and culturally relevant educational experience for Iranian students. Within the backdrop of this research, extant literature has primarily focused on comparative analyses either between European educational approaches (Aljabreen, 2020; C. P. Edwards, 2002; Gilad Goldshmidt, 2021; Noorian Far et al., 2023; Rudge, 2008; Solati Asl et al., 2022; Turós, 2024) or juxtaposing a singular approach against an Islamic theoretical framework (Amir Haeri, 2016; Didehvar, 2014; Masume Kiyani, 2023; Masomeh Kiyani & Sahrakari, 2023; Sajjadieh, 2020).

However, a noticeable lacuna persists in the scholarly landscape, characterized by a dearth of studies that systematically investigate popular early childhood education approaches within Iran. Furthermore, the absence of inquiries that scrutinize these approaches through the lens of Islamic educational philosophy, as delineated in Iran's formal developmental documents, is conspicuous. This research aims to address this gap by offering a comprehensive examination of early childhood education paradigms within Iran, contextualized within the framework of Islamic educational principles elucidated in official Iranian documents.

This article delves into the intricate relationship between Islamic educational principles and Early Childhood Education Programs (ECEP) in the context of Iranian educational reform. The study investigates two central questions by centering its analysis on upstream Iranian education reform documents representing Islamic educational ideals. First, it explores the pedagogical alignment between the approach outlined in these documents for preschool and primary education and the approaches championed by three prominent programs: Waldorf, Montessori, and Reggio Emilia. This comparative analysis aims to identify areas of convergence and divergence in their educational philosophies. Second, the article examines the degree of philosophical consonance between these programs and the foundations of Islamic education as articulated within the IERD.

2. Research Method

To illuminate these intricate connections, the article employs a multifaceted methodological framework. It utilizes a comparative research method and documentary data collection, allowing for a comprehensive examination of the subject matter. The validity of the data was determined through self-review by researchers and consultation with expert opinions. To ensure the study's reliability, the article undertakes a dual-level comparison between the two (ECEP and IERD) under scrutiny. Practically, it delves into the fundamental alignment of pedagogical activities, methodically dissecting, juxtaposing, and interpreting their similarities and differences. Simultaneously, on a theoretical plane, the article navigates the philosophical underpinnings of both subjects, meticulously elucidating, contrasting, and interpreting their respective foundations.

3. Findings

Early Childhood Education Programs

Here, it is necessary to review three modern programs:

Waldorf Approach

Rudolf Steiner, acclaimed as the progenitor of Waldorf education, epitomized a multidisciplinary approach spanning philosophy, theology, medical sciences, and the performing arts. Against the backdrop of post-World War I tumult, Steiner inaugurated the Waldorf School in 1919 (Steiner, 2001), enshrining foundational principles that endure to this day (Uhrmacher, 2014). These principles, as delineated by Steiner and still upheld in contemporary Waldorf pedagogy, are fourfold: neutrality towards religious, sectarian, racial, and economic affiliations; coeducation; the cultivation of comportment unity across all twelve educational stages; and the stewardship of educational governance vested within a community of educators (G. Goldshmidt, 2017). Distinguished by its comprehensive scope encompassing all twelve educational stages from ages seven to eighteen, Waldorf education is a unique paradigm among three educational programs. While primarily recognized for its commitment to holistic education, particularly in early childhood, with a significant emphasis on preschool education, the global proliferation of Waldorf institutions attests to its enduring appeal. Approximately 900 Waldorf schools and over 1500 kindergartens exist in more than 58 countries, alongside 110 teacher-training centers across 34 nations (Rudge, 2008). A set of guiding principles underpins the ethos of Waldorf pedagogy.

Instructional methodology predicates a holistic "whole-to-parts" approach, privileging experiential learning over didacticism. Following a Goethean ethos, scientific inquiry is grounded in empirical observation rather than abstract formulae. Furthermore, the ethos of care supersedes punitive measures, fostering an environment of nurturing rather than disciplinary action (Ashley, 2009, p. 215). Emphasizing the significance of ritual and routine, Waldorf education accords primacy to artistic expression within its curriculum. Central to this educational paradigm is the pivotal role of the teacher as a model for the child, particularly during the formative years when learning is predominantly acquired through imitation(Uhrmacher, 1995).

Montessori Approach

Maria Tecla Artemesia Montessori, a distinguished Italian physician, embarked upon her pedagogical journey through meticulous scientific and pedagogical inquiries into the education of children with disabilities. Her pioneering efforts culminated in applying her innovative educational principles to typically developing children aged 4 to 7 in impoverished regions of Rome, notably with the inception of the "casa dei Bambini" (children's house) in San Lorenzo in 1907. The publication of her seminal work, "The Montessori Method," (Montessori, 1912)catapulted her methodology to international prominence, prompting Montessori to disseminate her educational philosophy worldwide. By 1913, the United States alone boasted approximately 100 Montessori schools, with additional establishments in Spain, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, and India (Whitescarver & Cossentino, 2008). Unlike trademarked programs, the Montessori Method lacks formal trademark protection, rendering the enumeration of Montessori-affiliated institutions challenging. Nevertheless, the American Montessori Society (AMS) stipulates four indispensable criteria for Montessori schools: mixed-aged classrooms facilitating peer mentorship, a comprehensive array of developmentally appropriate Montessori learning materials, educators possessing credentials from accredited Montessori teacher education programs, and adherence to the Montessori instructional paradigm, characterized by educator guidance rather than didactic impartation of knowledge. Central to the Montessori pedagogical ethos are several foundational principles(Morrison et al., 2022). Foremost among these is the notion of child reverence, which advocates for individualized pedagogical interventions tailored to the child's unique interests and learning tempo, thus affording them the freedom to select their educational pursuits. Montessori also expounded upon the concept of sensitive periods, positing that children exhibit heightened receptivity to particular behaviors and skill acquisition during specific developmental phases. Furthermore, the significance of the prepared environment within the Montessori framework

cannot be overstated. This environment is characterized by meticulous organization, aesthetic appeal, accessibility, authenticity, and synthesis with the natural world (Rathunde, 2009). Learning materials within this environment are meticulously designed to engage the senses, foster independent exploration, and feature inherent error correction mechanisms. Moreover, Montessori's innovative integration of mind-body balance underscores the holistic nature of education, wherein intellectual development is not divorced from sensory experiential learning. The concept of the absorbent mind posits that children possess an innate predisposition to absorb knowledge from their surroundings, particularly during the formative years from birth to age six. Accordingly, Montessori advocated creating informative and stimulating environments conducive to unconscious learning experiences. Central to the Montessori philosophy is the cultivation of concentration, facilitated through sensorial learning experiences, communion with nature, moments of reflective silence, and the preservation of uninterrupted periods of children's engagement in meaningful activities

Reggio Emilia Approach

Rooted in Loris Malaguzzi's educational philosophy, the Reggio Emilia approach burgeoned from a grassroots movement catalyzed by post-World War II aspirations for social and cultural reconstruction. This epochal movement, driven by a collective ambition to cultivate a populace of creative, discerning individuals imbued with democratic ideals, epitomized a local endeavor to revitalize the societal fabric through education. The genesis of the Reggio Emilia approach can be traced back to establishing the inaugural preschool in the hamlet of Villa Cella in 1945, spearheaded by Loris Malaguzzi, a stalwart elementary school educator from Reggio. Funding for this pioneering initiative was sourced from the sale of surplus war remnants, including a tank, horses, and a truck abandoned by retreating Nazi forces (Thornton & Brunton, 2015). Reggio Emilia schools exclusively serve preschool-aged children, reflecting their foundational emphasis on early childhood education. Malaguzzi's pedagogical vision eschewed prescriptive frameworks, recognizing the inherently contingent nature of education, thereby precluding Reggio Emilia from being formalized into a rigid model or method (C. Edwards et al., 1998). Central to Malaguzzi's educational philosophy were three guiding principles: universal access to education, holistic development of children, and conscientious attention to environmental influences in the educational milieu (Yousefi, 2017). Distinctive features of the Reggio Emilia approach encompass a profound emphasis on reciprocal relationships underpinned by mutual trust, respect, and dialogue among children, parents, and educators(Malaguzzi, 1993). This relational ethos, emblematic of the local culture, is underscored

by the "Pedagogy of Listening," which venerates the sanctity of empathetic engagement (Thornton & Brunton, 2015). Echoing the Montessori ethos, the Reggio Emilia approach venerates the environment as the 'Third Teacher,' wherein learning is intricately intertwined with environmental interaction (Strong-Wilson & Ellis, 2007). Purposefully designed spaces catalyze cognitive exploration, fostering opportunities for children to ideate, cogitate, and articulate their thoughts. Embracing an emergent curriculum paradigm, Reggio Emilia eschews predetermined syllabi, instead privileging pedagogical activities that organically emanate from children's curiosities and interests, guided by facilitative educators(McNally & Slutsky, 2017). The project-based methodology further accentuates inquiry-driven learning, empowering children to pursue their inquiries and ideas within collaborative group settings, thereby transcending reductionistic subject-centric approaches (Thornton & Brunton, 2015). Central to the Reggio Emilia approach is comprehensive documentation reflective of children's multifaceted modes of expression, termed "A Hundred Languages." Documentation is a conduit for pedagogical reflection and planning, fostering continuity and coherence in children's developmental trajectories.

Evaluative Summary and Discussion on Comparison of three Approaches

The comparative analysis of Montessori, Reggio Emilia, and Waldorf reveals nuanced commonalities reflective of their child-centric ethos. These shared characteristics, elucidated through a scholarly lens, illuminate potential synergies with indigenous educational theories in Iran, underscoring the universality of pedagogical principles across cultural contexts. The cultural affinity between Montessori and Reggio Emilia, both hailing from Italy, underscores their shared pedagogical lineage. Reggio Emilia, often regarded as a post-Montessori approach, exhibits a profound commitment to child-centeredness, albeit with a heightened emphasis on individualistic orientations and artistic expression imbued with spiritual undertones. Conversely, Waldorf, originating from Germany, espouses a holistic, intuitionist pedagogical philosophy imbued with spiritual and authoritative elements characteristic of Steiner's educational paradigm. While exhibiting a semblance of teacher-centeredness, Waldorf's emphasis on care relations and artistic endeavors invigorates individualistic tendencies, albeit within a spiritually imbued framework. The salient commonalities among these programs are manifold. First, all three approaches prioritize child-centeredness. This concept is intertwined with the progressive movement in the history of education, which can be traced back to the theories of Rousseau and Pestalozzi. This movement has had two significant consequences. First, education should focus on the child as a whole, composed of various aspects. Second, the starting point of all education should be the child's early

experiences, interests, and needs. Accordingly, the teacher should assume the role of facilitator and guide for the child's learning (Willams, 2012). However, this child-centeredness manifests along a spectrum, with Reggio Emilia epitomizing the pinnacle of child-centric practice. At the same time, Waldorf leans towards a more teacher-centered orientation tempered by spiritual ideals. Second, each program underscores the importance of engaging the senses and nurturing environmental relationships as fundamental conduits for knowledge acquisition. This sensorial engagement fosters a holistic understanding of the child as an integrated entity within their environment. Third, political, social, and ethnic divisions are eschewed within all three approaches, affirming children's inherent right to education irrespective of societal categorizations, including gender segregation. Fourth, a holistic view of the child as a multifaceted entity is embraced across all programs facilitated through diverse modes of expression and environmental engagement. Lastly, pedagogical activities within each approach are purposeful, rooted in child-centered principles, and tailored to the unique needs of the learners. This fluidity in curriculum content engenders a process-oriented pedagogy, wherein the learning journey supersedes the fixation on predetermined outcomes. While Waldorf may exhibit a slight inclination towards product-oriented education due to its spiritual underpinnings, the gradation of spirituality in the approach aligns it closely with its counterparts. In sum, Montessori, Reggio Emilia, and Waldorf's convergence of child-centric principles, sensory engagement, inclusivity, holistic perspectives, and process-oriented pedagogy underscores their intrinsic relevance to indigenous educational theories in Iran, offering fertile ground for cross-cultural dialogue and pedagogical enrichment.

Preschool and Primary education in IERD

Preschool education

The inception of preschool education in Iran post-Islamic Revolution represents a strategic maneuver aimed at reforming the educational landscape, with initial efforts commencing in 1987 as part of broader educational restructuring initiatives. Over time, preschool education has solidified its position within primary schools, initially serving as a preparatory one-year course for children transitioning to primary education, gradually expanding to encompass both public and non-public educational institutions under government sanction. The significance of preschool education is underscored by IERD, which delineates it as a formal, non-compulsory two-year program tailored for five and six-year-old children, with pedagogical activities tailored to suit the unique characteristics of the children (Supreme Council of Education, Section 13, 2012b). In the realm of preschool curriculum planning, several guiding principles emerge to guide educational endeavors:

- Flexibility of Programs: A fundamental tenet emphasizes the adaptability of programs to facilitate the acquisition of moral and religious skills, fostering individual, familial, and societal well-being by regulating inner desires through external guidance .

- Innate Aspect of Growth: Recognizing the innate developmental trajectory of children, the curriculum seeks to nurture intrinsic aspects of growth, cultivating holistic development across cognitive, emotional, and spiritual domains.

- Rich and Diverse Environment: The provision of a vibrant, joyful, and diverse learning environment is prioritized to foster engagement, exploration, and discovery, promoting active participation and meaningful learning experiences.

- Freedom of Action and Enjoyable Learning: Emphasizing the importance of autonomy and enjoyment in the learning process, children are afforded freedom of action to explore and engage with educational stimuli, enhancing motivation and fostering a positive attitude towards learning.

- Sensory Nurturing and Imagination: The curriculum emphasizes sensory stimulation and imaginative exploration as essential components of early childhood development, fostering creativity, cognitive flexibility, and sensory-motor integration.

- Emotional Preparation for Quranic Teachings: A foundational aspect of the curriculum involves creating an emotional context conducive to familiarizing children with Quranic teachings and Islamic values, instilling moral and religious principles from an early age, in alignment with the developmental needs of the children (Supreme Council of Education, 2010, pp. 340-350).

While these principles encapsulate both child-centric and humanistic perspectives, it is noteworthy that there exists a delineation between principles focusing on children's needs, such as flexibility, freedom, and sensory nurturing, and those emphasizing human aspects, including moral and religious education and control of unjustified desires. However, there appears to be a lack of firm emphasis on gender segregation within the preschool curriculum, reflecting evolving societal norms and educational paradigms in contemporary Iran.

Primary Education

The primary education stage in Iran, as delineated in IERD, embodies a set of core properties aimed at nurturing holistic development and preparing students for future academic pursuits.

These properties, outlined within the educational framework, serve as guiding principles for educators and curriculum designers:

- Experiential Learning Opportunities: Primary education provides students diverse pedagogical opportunities for hands-on, experiential learning. Through active participation in various activities and projects, students are encouraged to explore, experiment, and apply their knowledge in real-world contexts.

- Promotion of Collective Spirit and Responsibility: A fundamental aspect of primary education is cultivating teamwork, collaboration, and a sense of responsibility among students. Through collaborative learning experiences and group projects, students learn to work cooperatively, communicate effectively, and respect diverse perspectives, fostering a supportive learning community.

- Acquisition of Fundamental Concepts: Primary education aims to equip students with a solid foundation in fundamental concepts and causal relations, fostering the development of scientific and logical thinking skills. Students engage in inquiry-based learning activities, problem-solving tasks, and critical thinking exercises to deepen their understanding of core subject areas.

- Laying the Groundwork for Personal Interests: Primary education allows students to explore and develop their interests and passions. Educators strive to create a nurturing learning environment that encourages curiosity, exploration, and self-discovery, allowing students to pursue their interests and develop a sense of agency over their learning journey.

- Educating Creativity and Imagination: Primary education strongly emphasizes nurturing students' creativity and imagination. Through arts, music, storytelling, and other creative outlets, students are encouraged to express themselves creatively, think innovatively, and explore new ideas, fostering a lifelong appreciation for the arts and humanities(Supreme Council of Education, 2010, p. 351).

- Teaching Life Sciences: An integral component of primary education is the teaching of life sciences, encompassing the study of living organisms, their habitats, and basic biological concepts. Students engage in hands-on activities, experiments, and investigations to deepen their understanding of the natural world and develop an appreciation for the diversity of life forms(Supreme Council of Education, 2010, 2012b).

By incorporating these core properties into the primary education curriculum, educators in Iran aim to provide students with a comprehensive and enriching learning experience that fosters holistic development, critical thinking skills, and a passion for lifelong learning. The aim of life sciences education within the primary curriculum is multifaceted, encompassing a reverence for nature, responsible stewardship, and a deepening understanding of the interconnectedness of all living beings as creations of God. Students are encouraged to engage with nature respectfully and thoughtfully, recognizing their role as active participants in promoting individual, familial, national, and global well-being. Similarly, scientific education is a cornerstone of life sciences, emphasizing the pursuit of unity, teleological perceptions of creation, and the exploration of the universe's intricacies. Through scientific inquiry and exploration, students develop cognitive skills and logical reasoning abilities, enabling them to decode the natural world's mysteries and appreciate its inherent complexities. At the primary level, there is a deliberate focus on nurturing cognitive skills and logical perception, emphasizing the development of students' capacity for critical thinking and problem-solving. Additionally, the curriculum aims to instill moral and ethical values in students, fostering a sense of responsibility and empathy towards others. The primary stage of education in Iran adopts a teacher-centered approach. For the first three years, a single teacher oversees the education of students aged 7-9. This allows for continuity and consistency in instruction and allows the teacher to address the individual needs of each student. Furthermore, the curriculum considers the unique needs of each gender, ensuring that educational experiences are tailored to meet all students' diverse learning styles and preferences. Additionally, the primary curriculum prioritizes program-oriented learning over-reliance on textbooks, promoting experiential and hands-on learning experiences. However, the rigid allocation of 1000 hours for specified subjects can challenge the flexibility of the curriculum, limiting opportunities for interdisciplinary exploration and creative teaching approaches. Despite this limitation, educators strive to create engaging and dynamic learning environments that inspire curiosity, foster intellectual growth, and instill a lifelong love of learning.

Comparative Analysis of ECEP and IERD on Preschool and Primary Education

Given that curriculum development hinges on fundamental views of human beings, a potential tension arises during the comparison. So, these two core axes, though intricately linked, may be treated as distinct entities. Whenever we consider the comparison of ECEP and IERD in preschool and primary education, two important points can be seen: they are similar in preschool and different in primary school. This is shown in tables 1and 2:

Table1. ECEP and IERD in Preschool Education

	ECEP	IERD	Aligned Or Not Aligned
Curriculum Features	Fluidity Of Contents and Programs	Flexibility Of the Program	Aligned
	Student-Centeredness and Attention to Children's Interests and Sensitivities in Planning	Respect For Freedom and Choice	Aligned
	Prioritizing Student Interaction with The Environment and Nature	Nurturing Children's Senses and Imagination	Aligned
Human Aspects and Tendencies	Nurturing The Senses as The Most Important Source of Children's Knowledge	Attention To the Development of Natural Inclinations	Aligned
	Avoiding Religious, Social, Political, And Ethnic Boundaries	Creating Opportunities for Familiarity and Belonging to Islamic Teachings	Not Aligned
	Comprehensive And Holistic View of The Child	Acquisition Of Moral and Religious Skills Control of Unjustified desires	Not Aligned

The table highlights two crucial observations regarding the comparison between traditional Islamic teachings and modern educational approaches, particularly evident in the context of preschool education:

First, despite differences in approach, traditional Islamic teachings and modern programs prioritize addressing children's needs. This convergence underscores a shared commitment to promoting holistic development and nurturing the well-being of young learners.

Second. a notable distinction arises in the realm of freedom and control within the educational context. While modern approaches prioritize freedom and autonomy for children, traditional Islamic teachings may impose limitations on freedom in adherence to religious principles. This imposition of outer control, particularly evident in Islamic teachings, can potentially restrict children's freedom in certain aspects of their educational experiences. However, it is essential to note that in Waldorf and Montessori approaches, although there are prescribed guidelines rooted in the rituals and psychology of the child, the restrictions are tailored within a specific educational framework. In contrast, the Reggio Emilia approach affords children greater freedom, allowing for a more open-ended and child-directed learning environment.

Table 2. ECEP and IERD in Primary Education

	ECEP	IERD	Aligned Or Not Aligned
Curriculum Features	Fluidity Of Content and Programs	Program-Centered Fixed Curriculum and Fixed Educational Program Possibility Of Gaining Various Practical Experiences	Not Aligned
	Respect For Freedom and Choice Student-Centeredness and Attention to Children's Interests and Subtleties in Planning	Teacher-Centered Product-Centered and Special Attention to Educational Goals	Not Aligned
	Priority To Student Interaction with The Environment and Nature	Creating Suitable Conditions for Learning Basic Concepts and Understanding Causal Relationships to Achieve Logical and Scientific Thinking	Aligned
		Teaching Experimental Sciences to Recognize and Use Nature Responsibly as Part of Divine Creation Cultivating The Spirit of Teamwork and Responsibility	Not Aligned
Human Aspects and Tendencies	Cultivation Of the Senses as The Most Important Source of Children's Knowledge	Cultivation Of Creativity and Imagination of Students	Aligned
	Avoidance Of Religious, Social, Political, And Ethnic Boundaries	Educating About Right and Wrong, Beautiful and Ugly Values Compliance With the Requirements of Gender Segregation, Teaching the Essential Observance of Sexual Morality and Clothing	Not Aligned
	A Comprehensive and All-Encompassing View of The Child	Possibility Of Gaining Various Practical Experiences .	Aligned

The divergence between these two, particularly evident in the context of public schools, underscores fundamental differences in educational philosophies and societal values. While both

approaches share commonalities in addressing children's needs and fostering holistic development, they diverge significantly where IERD emphasizes certain aspects of education, such as religious teachings, discipline, the rigidity of curricular activities, and gendered education. However, where is the root of this diversity? Given the growing popularity of modern approaches, is it possible to reach a compromise?

Philosophical Foundations of ECEP

The philosophical underpinnings of Waldorf education find their roots in Anthroposophy, a form of cognitional humanism synonymous with the pursuit of human wisdom. In contrast to Theosophy, which draws inspiration from Eastern religious traditions, Anthroposophy is firmly grounded in esoteric Christianity. These foundational tenets, as elucidated by Uhrmacher (2014, p. 847), are as follows. First, it recognizes that a coalescence between the tangible and spiritual realms underscores Anthroposophy. Hence, endeavors to resolve challenges solely through a materialistic lens are futile. Second, central to anthroposophical doctrine is the belief in the latent faculties within human beings, facilitating the potential for perception and engagement with the spiritual domain. Third, in anthroposophy, advanced practitioners of spiritual inquiry, referred to as spiritual investigators, attain a heightened level of cognition, enabling conscious immersion into the objective spiritual realm. Thus, there is a transcendental concern in all pedagogic activities that interactions between teacher and child are not restrained to this world, and there is always a tendency to reach a priori goal.

According to Steiner's perspective, child development unfolds in three distinct, approximately seven-year periods from birth to 21, with each stage presenting unique developmental needs(Steiner, 1996). Consequently, education within Waldorf pedagogy is envisioned as a harmonious synthesis of hand, heart, and head. Correspondingly, within these developmental epochs, the child progresses through stages characterized by willing, feeling, and thinking, necessitating pedagogical strategies centered around imitation, imagination, and reasoning, respectively (de Souza, 2012). Moreover, fostering a profound connection with nature is a fundamental method employed within the Waldorf educational framework. It engenders a profound sense of unity with the child's natural world, facilitating a deeper connection to the spiritual realm. In Montessori education, philosophical elements are not well specified, maybe because she was a physician, not a philosopher. However, the Montessori method, socially and philosophically, is part of the progressivist movement, opposing the traditional approach, and psychologically, it is based on brain development studies. Like Steiner, Montessori presents three 6-

year phases for child growth. As Frierson(2014) puts it, in Montessori's epistemology, interested empiricism is the foundation of all knowledge for her. This definition has two parts. First, it owes its empiricism to British empiricists like Lock and Hume. Second, the insistence on individual interests shows this empiricism is active and teleological. From a philosophical-social perspective, the Reggio Emilia approach aligns with the Progressivism movement. However, it finds its theoretical underpinnings in Social Constructivism when viewed through a psychological lens. This dual perspective underscores the significance of "Learning by Doing" and emphasizes the pivotal role of social interactions in children's learning experiences. As Malaguzzi says, "What children learn does not follow as an automatic result from what is taught. Rather, it is largely due to the children's actions as a consequence of their activities and our resources."(Malaguzzi, 1998, p. 67). These educational approaches share commonalities reflective of modernist ideals akin to Humanism. This modernist ethos manifests through three core principles: First, an emphasis on an individualistic conception of the human being, foregrounding each person's unique attributes and potentials; second, a profound emphasis on fostering a deep connection with nature, recognizing its intrinsic value and its role in human development; third, a rejection of religious authority in favor of acknowledging spirituality as an innate, personal facet of human experience, divorced from its traditional role in shaping societal structures. While Waldorf education is grounded in spirituality, it diverges from conventional religious paradigms by espousing a form of human wisdom, prioritizing individual exploration and understanding over adherence to external spiritual or supernatural authorities.

Foundations and Principles of Education in IERD

In the reform documents of Iranian education, the philosophical underpinnings are deeply rooted in Islamic teachings. This section offers a succinct examination and analysis of the ontological and anthropological fundamentals. It is important to note that while TFFRD touches upon the underpinnings of values, it is apparent that in both Islamic and modern educational paradigms, the roots of values often stem from the ontological and anthropological foundations of the respective systems, from which the guiding principles of education are derived. The ontological framework encompasses the reality of the universe, the transcendent presence of God beyond nature, and the inherent dependence of all creatures on God for their creation, sustenance, and ultimate purpose. Furthermore, it acknowledges the unity and plurality inherent in the universe, as well as its integral and verse-like nature, underscoring the interconnectedness and harmony of existence (Supreme Council of Education, 2010, pp. 39-45). In this respect, a prominent theme

emerges; the primacy and sovereignty of God's existence in shaping our understanding of the world. God is the ultimate reference point and standard by which all knowledge about the natural realm is measured. Thus, observing nature assumes a sacred significance akin to deciphering verses of divine revelation. This authority of God extends to the realm of education, influencing the delineation of goals, principles, methods, and content. As both the creator and orchestrator of worldly affairs, God's authority permeates all aspects of educational endeavor, guiding pedagogical activities' overarching direction and orientations (Iran Supreme Council of Education, 2010, pp. 50, 92). The anthropological foundations outlined in IERD primarily delve into the intricacies of human characteristics, abilities, and constraints. Key among these are the inseparable union of body and soul, emphasizing the primacy of the soul; the essence of humanity; the concept of human freedom, agency, and the ensuing responsibilities towards both God and fellow beings; the inherent dignity of mankind; and the divine directives, including trials and tribulations, bestowed upon humanity. Furthermore, the presence of limitations such as weakness, greed, oppression, ingratitude, ignorance, impatience, and forgetfulness in humans are also acknowledged (Supreme Council of Education, 2010, pp. 47-52, 59, 65). Within these foundational principles, despite acknowledging humanity's vast capabilities, there arises a questioning of absolute autonomy and self-sufficiency. The precedence of God's authority and human obligations supersedes any notion of complete self-reliance. This divine authority guides individual and collective endeavors, dictating the parameters for actions and decisions. It is imperative to emphasize that God's authority, as delineated in religious texts, serves as the ultimate arbiter, encompassing aspects that transcend individual will and discretion. Regarding these foundations, some principles of education can be deduced as follows:

Necessity of a lifelong look at human education: The perspective espoused in IERD regarding human education embodies a broad and lifelong outlook rooted in the foundational principles of anthropology, particularly the concept of the soul's primacy. Despite the segmentation of education into distinct phases, these documents consistently emphasize the centrality of human education, with limited reference to educators, students, or children as mere subjects. This emphasis is underscored by the comprehensive definition of education provided, wherein it is portrayed as a holistic, gradual, and perpetual practice. This approach encompasses all voluntary and conscious human evolution facets, treating the individual as a unified entity. It is dedicated to the continuous and integrated enhancement of both individual and societal dimensions of human existence (Supreme Council of Education, 2010, p. 136). Undoubtedly, such a definition evinces a proclivity towards a product-oriented educational paradigm rather than a process-oriented one. The

emphasis on human education as the overarching goal inherently incorporates predetermined and specific attributes to attain the highest degree. Such goal-setting necessitates distinct planning and educational strategies divergent from the process-oriented approach. In the process-oriented paradigm, the primary focus lies in nurturing and enhancing the capabilities of the educator, highlighting a fundamentally different pedagogical trajectory.

Priority of religious teachings in education: In IERD, the theoretical underpinnings of education are unequivocally derived from sacred texts and Islamic philosophy, with a pronounced emphasis on prioritizing religious teachings at various educational stages. This prioritization directly reflects the ontological foundations outlined in these documents, wherein recognizing God as the origin and ultimate destination of all beings is paramount. Furthermore, this emphasis on religious teachings manifests in delineating educational goals across six distinct areas, prominently highlighting the centrality of religious, devotional, and moral education(Supreme Council of Education, 2012a, p. 19). Moreover, the prioritization of cultural and educational values, harmonized with religious and Quranic teachings, serves as the primary criterion for determining curriculum content within the national curriculum(Supreme Council of Education, 2012b). Additionally, there is a concerted effort to uphold religious rules and rituals, as well as moral standards, while fostering the cultivation and deepening of cultural values such as modesty, chastity, and Hijab, as articulated in the operational goals outlined in the transformation document(Supreme Council of Education, 2012a).

Centrality of the teacher in the course of education: Teacher-centeredness stands as a cornerstone principle within the transformational documents, stemming from the overarching authoritarianism inherent in Islamic metaphysics. The teacher is heralded as the most efficacious element in fulfilling the missions of both the official and public education systems, serving as a "guiding and insightful beacon"(Supreme Council of Education, 2012a). Notably, this teacher-centered approach pervades all educational levels without exception, with no provision or clause stipulating its adjustment according to the developmental needs of children and adolescents. Indeed, teacher-centeredness is opposed to child-centered approaches, which prioritize the empowerment of learners.

Disapproval of the individualized approach to education: Determining the extent to which the education system's orientation leans towards individualism or collectivism within IERD poses a challenge. While child-centeredness is not endorsed, the prominent role of teacher authority and the unequivocal sovereignty of God, as emphasized by ontological foundations, underscore a decisive influence. Additionally, human responsibility and accountability to God and others, as delineated by anthropological foundations, suggest a complex interplay. It is conceivable that an individualistic approach may be questioned within this context. However, the absence of an

individualistic stance does not necessarily imply the predominance of a collectivist approach in education. Notably, in the anthropological foundations, responsibility towards others is subordinated to responsibility towards God, and the collective will does not inherently hold primacy.

Centralization in the education system: Although this principle is not explicitly mentioned in the documents, its presence can be implicitly inferred as a principle of the policies that have been adopted in the official education of the country so far. Considering the historical precedence of centralization within Iran's education system, dating back to its inception, and its persistent detrimental impact on the educational process(Iravani, 2014), the transformational documents have endeavored to mitigate this issue by fostering structural and programmatic adjustments. These efforts include initiatives involving the non-governmental sector in education, challenging the centrality of textbooks (as articulated in the transformation document), and transitioning from a text-centered approach to a program-centered one within the national curriculum. However, the entrenched nature of centralized frameworks, meticulously defined to encompass subtopics and details, presents formidable obstacles to such reforms. Thus, substantial change in this regard will likely encounter significant challenges. The comparison between these two educational philosophies is shown in Table 3:

Table 3. Educational Philosophy in ECEP and IERD

	ECEP	IERD	Aligned Or Not Aligned
Curriculum Features	Child-centered	Teacher-centered	Not Aligned
	Anti-Authoritative	Authoritative	Not Aligned
	The Centrality of Interests in Education	The Centrality of Religion in Education	Not Aligned
	The Significance of Nature Interaction in Child Development	Encountering Nature as A Sign of God in Education	Partly Aligned
	Individualistic Approach to Education	Disapproval Of the Individualized Approach to Education	Partly Aligned
	Program-Oriented	Centralized Textbook-Centered Education	Not Aligned
Human Aspects & Tendencies	Focusing On Limited Periods of Human Life (Childhood)	Marking All Stages of Human Life in General	Not Aligned
	Limited Targeting and Minimal Demands from The Child	Broad Targeting and Maximum Demands from Human	Not Aligned
	Process-Oriented	Product-Oriented	Not Aligned

4. Conclusion

Findings highlight the significant disparities between IERD and modern educational approaches. For an Islamic society endeavoring to establish an educational system rooted in Islamic principles, it becomes imperative to devise a strategic approach that navigates the dichotomy between these divergent paradigms. Simply eliminating one in favor of the other is not a viable solution. Over the past three decades, modern educational methods have gained traction within Iranian families. However, this shift has brought about challenges as parents struggle to exert control over their children, and adherence to Islamic frameworks wanes. Despite this, modern schools remain increasingly popular. This underscores the need for a nuanced approach that reconciles the Islamic ethos of the IERD with the realities of modernity. Westernization in the East poses additional challenges to preserving Islamic values and culture, adding further constraints. However, the inefficacy of mainstream educational institutions has prompted a turn towards modern schools. A viable solution lies in adopting a median approach within Islamic education. While the IERD tends towards ritualism and authority, alternative Islamic educational approaches, such as the pragmatic, deliberative, theosophical, and theological approaches, offer broader perspectives on child freedom and religious beliefs (Ali & Reza, 2023). Integrating these diverse approaches could provide a more balanced and effective educational system, thereby mitigating the allure of purely modern approaches, irrespective of governmental sanction.

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