



A Phenomenological Study on Adaptation of Early Years Foundation Stage Curriculum in UAE

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ABSTRACT

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The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore how the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) curriculum, which was originally developed for a British context, is adapted and implemented within schools in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). While considering the UAE's diverse cultural and linguistic landscape, this research helps in addressing a critical gap in existing literature. Thus, a qualitative phenomenological research design was employed in the study. Data is collected through semi-structured interviews involving 25 participants and a few classroom observations, which includes EYFS teachers, curriculum coordinators, and policymakers from a few noteworthy British international schools in the UAE. The collected data were transcribed and analysed using the thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006). The findings seem to reveal several key themes that would most definitely influence the EYFS adaptation. The focus is on cultural adaptation of learning materials, language-related barriers, parental expectations, resource limitations, and finally the challenges in evaluating adapted resources. Educators are seen as frequently incorporating culturally relevant materials and applying strategies that would support the needs of a bilingual class to improve student engagement. The study sheds light on the importance of a well-structured evaluation framework and its application, the need for appropriate professional development opportunities for educators and the need for collaborative planning among shareholders to improve curriculum adaptation practices. The findings provide practical insights for the stakeholders seeking to strengthen the implementation of EYFS in multicultural educational contexts.

Keywords: *Constructivism; Cultural Appropriation; Curriculum Adaptation; Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS); Learning Resources*

Background

For every child, early childhood education is responsible for laying down crucial foundations for their entire lifelong learning journey, from significantly shaping a child's cognitive, linguistic, and social-emotional development to the main areas of learning. The UK's Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) curriculum, which is internationally recognised, aims to provide structured guidelines that support holistic and play-based learning experiences. However, when talking about the international implementation of EYFS, particularly in the context of the vast cultural and linguistic diversity of the learning environment of the UAE, the curriculum demands a considerable amount of adaptation to meet the needs. The British international schools based in the UAE represent a complex educational setting, where diverse cultural traditions and various languages intersect to create a unique challenging experience for EYFS educators.

Adapting the EYFS requires educators to balance the integrity of the curriculum while ensuring that its relevance to local values and linguistic diversity is maintained. Despite being used worldwide, there remains limited research addressing how an educator can practically and appropriately modify and assess EYFS resources to suit the needs of the students in the area. This study seeks to address the gaps found in this research by investigating how EYFS resources used by the educators are adapted, how they are evaluated, and the best strategies for their implementation within UAE international schools' context. It is done through the process of exploring the experience of the educator, which in turn illuminates both their effective practices in the class and the significant challenges they encounter in all aspects of their teaching.

Literature Review

The study has been primarily rooted in theories based on the grounds of constructivism and Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory. When talking about constructivism, as articulated predominantly by Piaget (2013) and Vygotsky (1978), the study emphasises how active learning is enhanced through emphasis on and interactions with culturally relevant and familiar materials. Piaget's thoughts on constructivism highlight a child's active role in knowledge construction, while Vygotsky's focus on the socio-cultural theory that placed more emphasis on the importance of social interaction and cultural context in learning. Coming to the Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979), which offers further depth and in turn emphasises that a child's development occurs within certain interconnected environmental systems, such as their families, the schools, and the broader communities of the place they reside in or their native culture. The key takeaway from these theories is that they help in contextualising how an educator can balance curriculum expectations with diverse cultural norms (Gay, 2018).

The secondary part of the research devotes emphasis to the structured evaluation criteria for an effective early childhood education (Blewitt *et al.*, 2020; Papatheodorou & Moyles, 2009). The theories of a structured framework allow the educators to help assess in a more systematic way the effectiveness of adapted resources, which in turn helps in giving an in-depth look at a child's cognitive, linguistic, and socio-emotional outcomes.

Based on all of the previously discussed theoretical foundations of constructivism and ecological systems theory, this study will help with a proposal of a conceptual framework. The proposed framework highlights how cultural context, the varied language diversity, parental expectations, resource availability, and evaluation practices would influence the effectiveness of curriculum adaptation and children's learning outcomes.

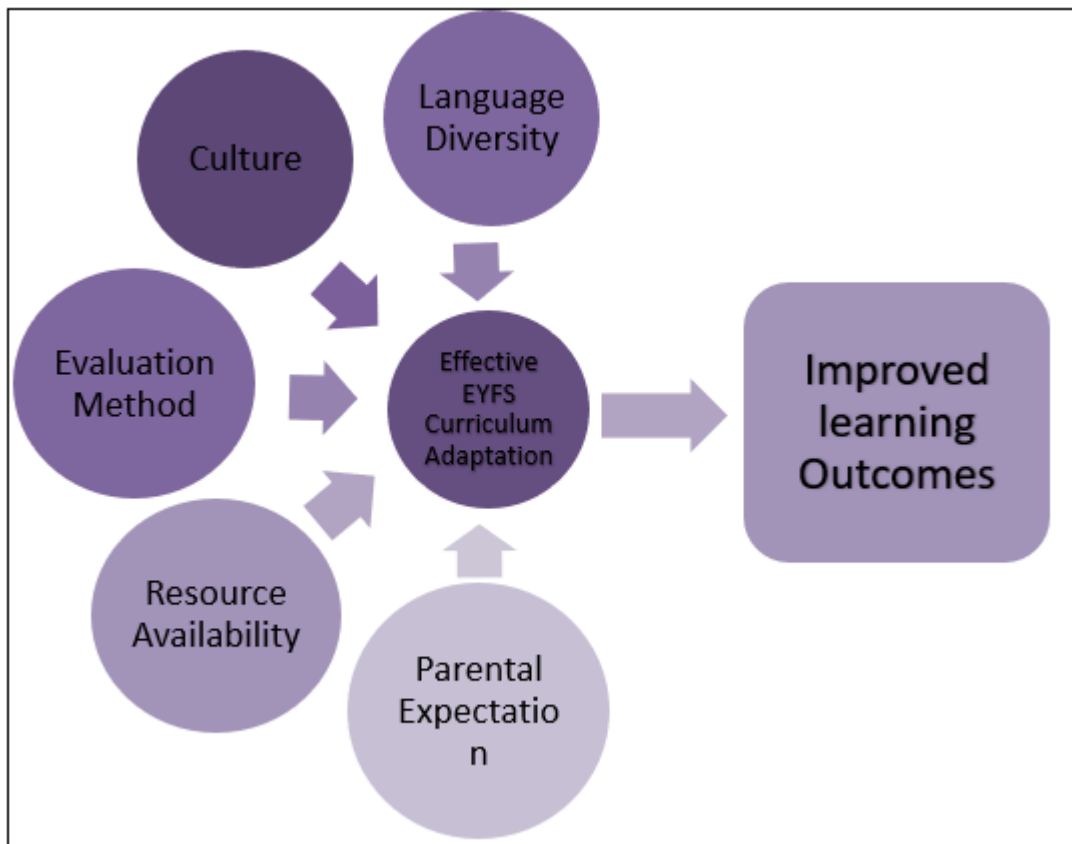


Figure 1. Proposed Conceptual Framework figure for Effective EYFS Curriculum Adaptation.

Methods

The study employs a qualitative approach where detailed data is gathered through semi-structured interviews and classroom observations. Participants included EYFS educators, curriculum coordinators, and policymakers. They were selected through sampling from a few British international schools across the UAE. The data collected from the interviews and observations were recorded, transcribed in detail, and finally analysed thematically. A total of 25 participants were involved in this study. The breakdown of which comprises twenty EYFS teachers, three curriculum coordinators and two policymakers from a few British international schools across the UAE. The data collection process involved 20 semi-structured interviews which lasted about 20 to 35 minutes approximately and three classroom observations that have really helped in capturing authentic and effective teaching practices. The data was then analysed using the thematic analysis outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). This allowed for the identification of common themes, challenges faced and effective strategies across all the participants' experiences. Finally, helping in highlighting any common patterns, important experiences, and varied perspectives.

Results and Discussion

Interesting findings from the interviews carried out with EYFS teachers and discussions with curriculum coordinators and policymakers in UAE British international schools were gathered. From the interview transcripts and the classroom observations, five major themes have been observed-cultural adaptation strategies, language-related barriers, parental expectations, resource limitations and finally, evaluation challenges.

Cultural Adaptation Strategies

Teachers frequently feel the need to adapt EYFS resources by integrating local Emirati culture for cultural appropriation, and due to the language barriers, they face when compared to students with English as their native language.

For example, one teacher explained:

"When we use storybooks or role-play activities, we try to include elements from UAE culture, such as National Day celebrations or traditional clothing. This helps children connect better with the learning experience."

These practices were seen to have notably increased student engagement and their comprehension, which in turn helped in confirming the value and importance of culturally appropriate adaptations. When talking about cultural integration and inclusivity, educators have been seen to consistently highlight the importance of integrating UAE cultural traditions into the EYFS curriculum. The curriculum includes celebrations like UAE National Day and Ramadan, and with such integration helps in significantly enhancing a child's cultural pride and improving their emotional engagement, which creates a more inclusive classroom.

Language-Related Barriers

When coming to the Challenges and Barriers an educator faces, it was seen that the primary challenge was language barriers.

One participant stated:

"Many of our students speak Arabic or other home languages. At the beginning of the year, we often need to simplify instructions and use visual aids or bilingual support."

The issues with language difficulties arose in almost every interview, where educators would often mention the difficulty, they faced teaching the students initially, which caused delays in the curriculum delivery. This is due to the varying levels of the student's English proficiency, where most students do not understand the language at all, which then result in with the teacher requiring to simplify language and often needing to employ bilingual supports for the lessons (Saracho & Spodek, 2013).

Parental Expectations

Another significant theme identified was the difference between parental expectations and the play-based philosophy of the EYFS curriculum.

"Some parents want more worksheets and formal learning because that is what they are familiar with."

These expectations are often seen favouring the traditional academic approaches for their children in the same way they learned, leading to increased tension and pressure for the teachers to fulfil both these expectations. This has been discussed infamously in Bronfenbrenner's theory (1979), which helped illuminate the complexity between the dynamics of home expectations and school expectations.

Resource Limitations

"We often design our own resources because many materials are designed only for the UK context."

It is observed that a very limited amount of culturally appropriate resources is easily available for educators, which places additional burdens on educators. Educators are required to frequently apply extensive personal effort in creating resources that are apt to their respective needs.

Talking about educators making their own resources due to resource scarcity (Epstein, J. L., 2002), the matter then leads to the evaluation of these resources and their effectiveness.

Evaluation Challenges

This is where the discussions and interviews with Coordinators and Policymakers will be able to shed light and where their expertise is needed. The current evaluation practices that are seen in the majority of schools predominantly involve informal methods, such as teacher observations, anecdotal notes, etc. While these methods prove to be valuable for immediate feedback, these informal methods are seen as lacking any systematic depth and often lack consistency. Educators often emphasize the urgent need for a structured evaluation framework, which is reflected in previous literature stating the need for standardized assessment criteria aligned directly with EYFS objectives (Blewitt *et al.*, 2020; Papatheodorou & Moyles, 2009).

During the interviews, participants strongly recommended the importance of professional development that would specifically target the best successful adaptation strategies observed by other educators and those that induce cultural responsiveness (Scott, Nolan & Kilderry, 2020). They also increasingly called for the importance of collaborative planning among educators throughout the UAE and for them to have clear, structured evaluation frameworks, which will help to enhance the consistency and the effectiveness of all EYFS adaptations.

Overall, what was noticed in the findings is that while EYFS adaptation in the UAE might have a semblance of a successful adaptation in many ways, there are still ways and areas that will benefit from an overall improvement. We know that almost all teachers are very creative and highly resourceful; they would still need better tools for evaluation and more professional development opportunities that are in line with their needs and to ensure that the adapted curriculum they are using continues to meet the children's learning needs here in the UAE (Nolan, Taket, & Casey, 2020).

The study's findings have offered very crucial and highly useful insights for any stakeholders across early year's education. It is consistent with the constructivist learning theory that has been proposed by Jean Piaget (1970) and the socio-cultural theory developed by Lev Vygotsky.

- Educators will gain clear and concise strategies that help enhance the support they receive through a variety of targeted professional development and some extensive collaborative opportunities for them.
- Curriculum Developers can utilize the available findings and are encouraged to design culturally responsive curriculum along with the support of creating linguistically accessible and appropriate materials for the UAE. They also can create a well-structured evaluation criterion that is linked explicitly to EYFS learning outcomes (Alexander, 2000).
- Policymakers and School Leaders are advised to make sure that priority is given to resource allocation to help support culturally apt curriculum adaptations in the school and to create an environment for the teachers to be able foster professional collaboration within schools (UNESCO, 2022 & Cheng, Y. C., 2005).

Despite a decent amount of contributions, which were made by educators from various schools, the data is limited to a relatively small sized sample, which in turn restricts any broader field of generalization so the findings cannot be applied to all UAE institutions. Also, since the studies were mostly focused only on EYFS (UK-based) schools, there were no comparison of the results with schools that follow any other curricula like IB or American systems. Additionally, this research can be considered as just touching the surface of a vast topic and with the absence of longitudinal data limits understanding of the topic and its long-term impacts of adapted resources, there is always further exploration that can be done.

In short, any future research directions can include the following – larger-scale studies (more than what was carried out now), a longitudinal data analysis of effectiveness of the curriculum, a mixed-method evaluation that would help provide a greater data triangulation, and finally a comprehensive study that examines the parental perspectives on EYFS practices.

Conclusion

This study significantly brings emphasis to the needs of the teacher and helps deepen the current understandings of how the EYFS curriculum is adapted within the UAE's vastly multicultural educational context. Through extensive qualitative analysis, it helped us reveal an educators' active role in the culturally appropriate and inclusive teaching practices and the substantial challenges that are faced in implementation of such practices in EYFS effectively. The research has helped us identify the underlying and urgent need for an approved structured evaluation method and the requirement of continuous professional development that help to ensure EYFS adaptations are effectively applied and the needs of diverse learners are met, making sure the environment fosters inclusive, engaging, and effective education. Overall, the study highlights the fact that adapting the EYFS curriculum within the UAE context requires ongoing collaboration among peers, availability of applicable professional training and guidance of a structured evaluation system to ensure that all culturally diverse learners receive engaging and high-quality education in their early years.

Declarations

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate: All participants provided informed consent before data collection. Their participation was voluntary, and their responses were kept strictly confidential throughout the study.

Conflicts of Interest: Not Applicable.

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