

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AS THE FOUNDATION OF LIFELONG LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

Early childhood education is not merely the initial stage of formal education, but rather a critical period that shapes individuals' cognitive foundations, emotional maturity, and learning habits. Early childhood education plays a strategic role in fostering readiness for lifelong learning and serves as the foundation for lifelong learning. This study employed a qualitative approach focused on a literature review. The data used in this study were secondary data obtained from books, journals, and published articles. The data collection method used was a literature review. Data analysis was conducted through the stages of data collection, verification, and drawing conclusions. The results of this study indicate that the quality of learning experiences during childhood has a significant correlation with later academic achievement, psychological well-being, and economic contribution as adults. The novelty of this article lies in the emphasis that investment in PAUD is a fundamental strategy for realizing sustainable human resource development.

Keywords: Early Childhood Education; Learning Framework; Lifelong Learning; Child Development.

INTRODUCTION

Early childhood education is a crucial phase in an individual's life development. This period is often referred to as *the* "formative years," meaning that every experience a child undergoes will have a significant impact on their character, personality, and ability to navigate life (Latifa, 2025). A child's development in early childhood encompasses not only cognitive aspects but also social, emotional, and spiritual aspects. Therefore, education during this period must be designed with an approach that is not merely technical and instructional but also holistic and humanistic. At this stage, a child is not merely a recipient of information but also begins to shape themselves through interactions with their surroundings, whether family, peers, or the community.

This stage serves as a strategy for human resource development and is a central and fundamental pillar. Early childhood is *the* "golden age," yet it is also a critically important period in human development. Early childhood education is a nurturing effort directed at children from birth through age six, carried out through educational stimulation to support both physical and spiritual development, thereby equipping children with greater readiness for the future.

Early childhood education is considered an educational program designed to develop the child's personality, knowledge, and skills that form the foundation of basic education, as well as to foster holistic self-development in accordance with the principles of education starting as early as possible and continuing throughout life. The aspects developed in early childhood education include behavioral development through habit formation, covering social, emotional, independence, moral, and religious values. It also encompasses the development of basic abilities, including language, cognitive, artistic, and psychomotor skills (Lasaiba, 2016).

Furthermore, early childhood education is the educational stage preceding formal schooling; it is a developmental effort aimed at children from birth through age six, implemented through educational stimulation to support physical and spiritual growth and development, ensuring children are prepared to enter further education (Fitri et al., 2025).

This stage is crucial for instilling a holistic education in every individual. Because of early readiness, the implementation of early childhood education can serve as a strong foundation for lifelong learning. This concept can endure over time if early childhood education is effectively implemented. Thus, ensuring every child receives early childhood education provides a fundamental, comprehensive understanding.

The concept of lifelong learning positions the learning process as a continuous journey that begins at birth and continues until the end of one's life (UNESCO, 2015). Among all life stages, the early childhood period plays the most critical role, as this is where significant developmental leaps—both biological and psychological occur with extremely high intensity.

From an economic perspective, various studies indicate that allocating resources to Early Childhood Education programs yields a greater *social return* compared to investments in other levels of education (Heckman, 2011). Strong evidence from longitudinal studies, such as the Abecedarian Project, confirms that high-quality interventions and stimulation provided from an early age yield measurable long-term positive impacts that persist into adulthood (Campbell et al., 2014). However, the reality in Indonesia still reflects a tendency to view early childhood education merely as a preparatory stage for elementary school. This article aims to move beyond this narrow perspective by highlighting the role of early childhood education as the primary foundation supporting an individual's learning capacity throughout their long lifespan.

In Indonesia, early childhood education has a strong legal basis through Law No. 20 of 2003 on the National Education System. Nevertheless, the challenges in fully understanding and implementing the essence of ECE remain an issue that requires academic examination. Therefore, this article aims to examine the essence of ECE as the foundation of lifelong education through a comprehensive conceptual approach.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a qualitative approach with a focus on literature review. The data used in this study are secondary data obtained from books, journals, and published articles. Data collection was conducted through a literature review. Data analysis involved the stages of data collection, verification, and drawing conclusions. The researcher read, collected, reviewed, and analyzed relevant academic documents, articles, books, and previous research findings. The results of this analysis were then systematically organized according to the research focus (Abdullah Hasibuan et al., 2025).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Concept of Lifelong Education

Based on its terminology, lifelong education is often referred to as *Life Long Education*. Lifelong education is an individual's effort to continuously acquire knowledge throughout their developmental period. Lifelong education (*Life Long Education*) is a principle stating that the educational process is continuous, beginning at birth and continuing until the end of life. This process encompasses various forms of learning informal, formal, and non-formal that occur within family, school, and social contexts.

Lifelong education is an educational model that asserts that learning is not limited to the school environment but continues throughout an individual's life. Lifelong education, or *lifelong learning*, emerged as a response to the rapid development of science and technology. This concept emphasizes that the learning process does not stop after a person completes formal education but continues continuously in various situations and environments (Anis Sabila et al., 2025).

Furthermore, Anis Sabila (2025) explains that lifelong learning is understood as a learning process that begins at birth and continues until the end of one's life. Society gains access to learning that is not constrained by physical space, time, or age limits. Anyone can access education even outside the classroom, and education is not restricted by age meaning the pursuit of knowledge does not end at the high school or university level but continues throughout one's entire life. Lifelong education is a shared responsibility among families, society, and the government. Lifelong education begins in the prenatal period, where a mother becomes the child's first educator, and this education continues as the child grows into adolescence, adulthood, and throughout their entire life.

Lifelong education is an educational concept that describes the entirety of teaching and learning activities in the process of character development, which occurs continuously throughout a person's entire life. The process of character development requires a relatively long period of time, even spanning a lifetime. Lifelong education, also known as Life-Long Education, is an educational approach that emphasizes that the educational process continues uninterrupted from the moment a person is born until their death, whether carried out through formal, non-formal, or informal education channels (Nabila Khairani & Gusmaneli Gusmaneli, 2024).

Life-long education is an educational concept that emphasizes the importance of a continuous learning process throughout a person's life, from birth to death. This process encompasses various forms of learning—informal, formal, and non-formal that take place in diverse contexts, such as the family, school, and community. Lifelong education plays a crucial role in shaping an individual's personality and supports the continuous growth of knowledge and skills (Puspitasari et al., 2024).

Early Childhood Education as the Framework for Lifelong Learning

Early Childhood Education (PAUD) serves as the framework and foundational basis for an individual's education and character development, provided to children aged 0 to 6 years. This age range marks the period of development for all the potential a child possesses. Thus, PAUD, as the foundational basis for individual character development, ensures the implementation of education that can continue throughout one's life (Latifa, 2025; Suryawahyuni Latief, 2020).

Based on the above statement, to understand the role of PAUD as a framework for lifelong education, it is necessary to understand several perspectives that explain early childhood education from various viewpoints. These perspectives are outlined as follows:

1. Philosophical Perspective: Fostering a Learner's Spirit

From a philosophical perspective, early childhood education positions children as active agents who help construct the reality around them. In line with Dewey's idea that education is a dynamic process of reconstructing experience, the essence of early childhood education is not merely the transfer of knowledge, but rather the cultivation of a "learning disposition"—that is, the mental readiness and intrinsic curiosity that will continue to drive children to learn throughout their lives.

2. Psychological Perspective: Optimizing Brain and Social-Emotional Development

Early childhood is characterized by the most rapid rate of growth and development of the nervous system (neurodevelopment). In addition to Piaget's classic theories on cognitive stages and Vygotsky's theories on the role of social interaction, recent research published in the journal *Science* confirms that high-quality early childhood education can significantly strengthen the brain's executive functions (Campbell et al., 2014). This enhancement serves as a valuable asset for children to develop self-regulation skills and achieve academic stability in the future (Yoshikawa et al., 2013).

3. Pedagogical Review: The Deep Meaning Behind Play Activities

The learning approach in early childhood education is child-centered, with play as its primary method (Bredenkamp & Copple, 2009). Play is by no means a meaningless activity; on the contrary, it is a complex process that serves as a vehicle for children to hone their creativity, practice problem-solving skills, and build social interactions. The quality of interactions and stimulation children receive during this period will form the foundation for their ability to adapt to various challenges and changes in the future (Britto et al., 2017).

4. Policy Review: The Urgency of Data-Driven Investment

Legally speaking, early childhood education (PAUD) has been recognized in Law No. 20 of 2003 as an integral part of the national education system. However, this article advocates that the implementation of government policies should not stop at the normative level but must also be grounded in an evidence-based approach (evidence-based policy). By referencing global standards, it is hoped that the policies adopted will be more targeted and effective in ensuring the sustainability of Indonesia's human resources.

Based on the explanation above, it can be said that early childhood education institutions play a role in shaping a child's commitment to lifelong learning. In reality, education does not end at a specific educational institution; rather, it continues as long as a person is alive. Since knowledge is constantly evolving, education will also evolve alongside these advancements in knowledge.

Early Childhood Education (PAUD) is not only the chronologically earliest stage but also serves as the foundational framework that determines the direction and quality of the educational process in subsequent stages. In other words, PAUD is not merely a prerequisite for entering formal education but rather the structural foundation for the development of lifelong learners.

Conceptually, lifelong education is rooted in the idea that learning is an existential human need. Education must be understood as a "common good" that builds individuals' capacity to adapt, participate, and contribute to an ever-changing society. In this context, early childhood education serves as the starting point for developing this capacity. During the early childhood phase, neurological structures develop very rapidly, so the quality of stimulation and interaction a child receives will influence their future thinking patterns, emotional regulation, and social skills (Aisyah Oktavia Siregar et al., 2025).

From a developmental perspective, early childhood is often referred to as the "golden age." During this time, synaptic connections in the brain develop significantly in response to experiences and the environment. This means that rich, safe, and supportive learning experiences will build a strong cognitive and emotional foundation. Conversely, a lack of stimulation or negative experiences can lead to developmental delays whose effects are felt well into adulthood. Therefore, early childhood education within the framework of lifelong learning serves as a long-term neurocognitive investment.

The framework for lifelong education also emphasizes the importance of fostering a *learning disposition*. This disposition includes curiosity, the courage to try, perseverance, and the ability to reflect on experiences (Zahro Ramadhani et al., 2025). In early childhood, learning dispositions are formed through enjoyable and meaningful experiences. When children feel valued, safe, and supported in the exploration process, they develop a positive attitude toward learning. This attitude is at the core of lifelong education. Individuals who have had positive learning experiences in childhood tend to be more open to new learning in adulthood.

From a pedagogical perspective, early childhood *education* (PAUD), as a framework for lifelong *learning*, requires a *child-centered* approach. *Play-based learning* is not merely an alternative method but a fundamental strategy for building critical and creative thinking skills. Through play, children learn to solve problems, use their imagination, negotiate, and develop language skills. Play activities also stimulate the brain's executive functions related to planning, decision-making, and self-control. These functions are prerequisites for complex learning at subsequent educational levels (Wahyuni et al., 2025).

The framework of lifelong education also presupposes continuity across educational levels. In this regard, early childhood education (PAUD) serves as a conceptual and psychological bridge to elementary education. If PAUD successfully fosters children's self-confidence and independence, the transition to elementary school will be more adaptive. Conversely, an overly academic approach that does not align with children's developmental characteristics risks causing learning anxiety with long-term consequences.

From a sociological perspective, early childhood education (PAUD) within the framework of lifelong learning also serves as an instrument of social justice. Access to quality early childhood education services can reduce developmental disparities caused by socioeconomic background.

Children from low-income families who receive high-quality early childhood education interventions have a greater chance of achieving academic and social success. Thus, ECE is not only an individual investment but also a strategy for inclusive and sustainable community development.

Furthermore, in an era of technological disruption and rapid social change, the ability to *relearn* and adapt has become a key competency of the 21st century. These abilities do not emerge suddenly in adulthood but are rooted in early learning experiences. Children who are accustomed from an early age to exploring, asking questions, and trying new things will grow into flexible and resilient individuals. Therefore, early childhood education (PAUD), as a framework for lifelong learning, must be designed to foster creativity, collaboration, communication, and contextual critical thinking (Suryawahyuni Latief, 2020).

From a policy perspective, strengthening early childhood education (PAUD) as an integral part of lifelong learning requires a systemic approach. The curriculum, teacher training, and learning assessments must align with the long-term goals of human development. PAUD must not be separated from the overall vision of national education. In the Indonesian context, integrating PAUD with basic education and human resource development policies is a strategic step toward ensuring the continuity of the learning process.

In addition, family and community involvement are key factors in establishing a framework for lifelong learning. Early childhood education takes place not only in formal institutions but also within the family environment. Supportive parenting, warm communication, and parental involvement in children's learning activities reinforce the positive effects of early childhood education. Synergy between schools, families, and the community fosters a sustainable learning ecosystem (Cut Hilwa Maretha et al., 2025).

Theoretically, early childhood education (PAUD), as a framework for lifelong learning, can be understood through a developmental ecology approach. Children develop within an interconnected system comprising the family, school, community, and public policy. The quality of interactions within these systems determines the direction of a child's development. Therefore, strengthening ECE must be viewed as an effort to build a system that supports continuous learning processes, not merely an improvement of the curriculum alone (Anis Sabila et al., 2025).

In practical terms, the implication of this understanding is the need for a paradigm shift from "*school readiness*" to "*lifelong learning readiness*." This orientation prioritizes the development of a learning mindset as the primary goal. Indicators of success in early childhood education are not merely the ability to read or count, but also independence, curiosity, empathy, and adaptability.

Thus, Early Childhood Education, as a framework for lifelong learning, has multiple dimensions: biological, psychological, pedagogical, social, and policy-related. Each of these dimensions is interconnected and forms the foundation that determines the quality of education in subsequent stages. Neglecting Early Childhood Education weakens the foundation of the entire education system. Conversely, strengthening Early Childhood Education lays a solid foundation for the realization of an adaptive and sustainable learning society.

Ultimately, lifelong education is not an abstract concept in and of itself. It is grounded in concrete experiences that begin at an early age. Early childhood education serves as the starting point for shaping individuals who are not only intellectually intelligent but also emotionally and socially mature. Therefore, positioning early childhood education as the framework for lifelong education is not merely a policy choice but a strategic imperative in human development in this dynamic global era.

CONCLUSIONS

Early Childhood Education cannot be understood merely as the initial stage of the formal education system, but rather as the conceptual foundation and framework for lifelong education. The golden years are a crucial period in the formation of an individual's cognitive, emotional, moral, and character capacities, which will impact the quality of the learning process in subsequent formal education structures as well as later stages of life. PAUD holds a strategic position in fostering sustainable learning readiness or serving as the foundation for lifelong education. Early Childhood Education plays a role in fostering learning dispositions that are central to lifelong learning, such as curiosity, perseverance, independence, and a reflective attitude. The early childhood period is also a time of brain development that shapes an individual's future quality, emotions, and adaptive abilities. Learning approaches are also an essential key to building fundamental strategies for developing creativity, critical thinking skills, and social skills. Furthermore, strengthening early childhood education is a long-term investment in sustainable and inclusive human resource development.

Access to quality early childhood education services contributes to reducing social disparities. Thus, the success of lifelong education is largely determined by the quality of the foundation laid during early childhood.

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