

Revisiting Ki Hadjar Dewantara's Among System as a Philosophical Foundation for Early Childhood Education

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ABSTRACT

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This study aims to examine the core principles of the Among System and to analyze their contextual application in contemporary Early Childhood Education practices. The research employed a qualitative library research design. Data were collected through document analysis of primary sources, including Ki Hadjar Dewantara's writings, and secondary sources such as scholarly books, peer-reviewed journal articles, and relevant educational literature. The research instrument consisted of document review guidelines focusing on the principles of the Among System and early childhood education concepts. Data analysis was conducted using qualitative content analysis through stages of data reduction, categorization, interpretation, and synthesis. The findings indicate that the principles of Ing Ngarso Sung Tuladha, Ing Madya Mangun Karsa, and Tut Wuri Handayani are

conceptually aligned with the nature of early childhood development and contemporary child-centered pedagogical approaches. These principles can be contextualized in classroom interactions, learning facilitation, and formative assessment practices to promote children's motivation, independence, and agency. In conclusion, Ki Hadjar Dewantara's Among System remains a relevant and applicable philosophical foundation for enhancing the quality and humanistic orientation of Early Childhood Education.

Introduction

As the main pillar of a child's holistic development, early childhood education is strategically important. The fundamental cognitive, socioemotional, linguistic, moral, and physical skills that are essential to a child's growth and preparedness for subsequent education and life are created during this formative period (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000; UNESCO, 2015). The dynamics of a child's cognitive, socioemotional, linguistic, moral, and physical development are critical in the early years (Berk, 2018). Numerous studies demonstrate that the quality of learning opportunities and stimulation at this time has a major influence on later life quality and educational attainment (Heckman, 2006; OECD, 2021). According to Article 1 Paragraph 14 Law Number 20 of 2003 concerning the National Education System, PAUD is a development initiative that targets children from birth to age six by offering educational stimulation to support their physical and spiritual growth

and development, so they are prepared to pursue higher education. Thus, early childhood education should be viewed as an educational process focused on the holistic and long-term development of children's potential rather than only as a phase of academic preparation.

Early childhood education should ideally be run using a child-centered strategy that values each child's individuality and fits their requirements and developmental stage (Bredekamp & Copple, 2009). A propensity toward early academicization that prioritizes reading, writing, and math skills at preschool age is one of the core difficulties facing Indonesia's early childhood education system. This trend toward strict, results-oriented instruction is frequently caused by parental pressure from the demands of the formal school system and false beliefs about Early Childhood school success indicators (Gwang-Jo Kim & Umayahara, 2010; Suyanto, 2012). Children's meaningful learning experiences and exploratory play are thus ignored (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009).

The Early Childhood Education instructional approach risks positioning children as objects to meet targets, rather than subjects of learning. Children are expected to conform to adult standards without considering their developmental readiness or individual characteristics (Bredekamp, 2018). This situation impacts not only academic aspects but also socio-emotional development, creativity, independence, and psychological well-being (Biesta, 2010). Therefore, Early Childhood Education issues require more fundamental philosophical reflection,

beyond simply improving learning methodologies.

Philosophical foundations play a crucial role in determining the direction of educational goals and practices (Noddings, 2018). Educational philosophy serves as a framework that underpins views on the nature of children, the role of educators, and the meaning of teaching and learning. Without a clear philosophical foundation, Early Childhood Education practices risk becoming trapped in pragmatic and technocratic approaches that emphasize efficiency and short-term achievements while neglecting human values. Therefore, strengthening the philosophical foundation is an urgent need for the development of quality and sustainable Early Childhood Education.

The perspective of Ki Hadjar Dewantara offers a relevant philosophical perspective to address this challenge. Dewantara (2004) views education as a process of developing children's nature to achieve the highest level of safety and happiness as human beings and members of society. Education is not understood as imposing the will of educators, but rather as facilitating the development of children's potential in a natural, contextual manner. The relevance of KHD's thinking is further strengthened when linked to the principles of Early Childhood Education, which emphasize child-centered learning and respect for developmental stages (Suryadi & Latifah, 2014). KHD's primary contribution to educational philosophy is the concept of the Among System, an educational system that places the child as the primary subject, while educators act as mentors, guiding and

accompanying them. The relationship between educator and child is based on trust, affection, and respect for the child's freedom (Dewantara, 2004).

The Among System rejects authoritarian and coercive approaches and emphasizes the importance of a learning environment that allows children to grow and develop according to their natural state. The principles of the Among System are formulated through Ki Hadjar Dewantara's trilogy: *Ing Ngarso Sung Tuladha*, *Ing Madya Mangun Karsa*, and *Tut Wuri Handayani*. These three principles illustrate the dynamic and contextual role of educators: as role models, motivators of learning, and providers of encouragement (Tilaar, 2009).

In Early Childhood Education, these principles have implications for learning practices that create a safe, enjoyable, and meaningful learning environment where educators act as active facilitators. Within the Among's System framework, the child is essentially a free individual with innate potential for development. Children are viewed as active, creative beings capable of learning through interaction with their environment. This view aligns with the modern early childhood education paradigm, which emphasizes the importance of exploratory play and direct experience as the primary means of (Chi Hyun et al., 2020; Piaget, 1962; Vygotsky, 1978). Therefore, the Among System has a strong conceptual alignment with the characteristics of early childhood education.

To deepen the analysis of Ki Hadjar Dewantara's Sistem Among

within the context of Early Childhood Education, this study formulates the following research questions:

1. What core philosophical values and principles of Ki Hadjar Dewantara's Among System are relevant to the nature and development of early childhood learners?
2. How can Ki Hadjar Dewantara's Among System be contextualized and applied to address challenges in contemporary Early Childhood Education practices?

Methods

This study employed a qualitative research design using a library research approach. The research focused on an in-depth conceptual and philosophical analysis of Ki Hadjar Dewantara's the Among System as a foundational framework for Early Childhood Education. A qualitative design was chosen to enable a comprehensive interpretation of educational ideas, values, and principles embedded in primary and secondary texts, rather than measuring variables quantitatively (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The study adopted a philosophical and descriptive-analytical approach, emphasizing interpretation, comparison, and synthesis of concepts relevant to contemporary Early Childhood Education practices (Fraenkel et al., 2019; Kaelan, 2012).

The population of this study consisted of educational literature related to Ki Hadjar Dewantara's educational philosophy and Early Childhood Education. The sample was determined purposively and included selected primary sources, such as Ki Hadjar Dewantara's

original works and writings on the Among System, as well as secondary sources, including 5 journal articles, 9 books, and 1 policy documents discussing Early Childhood Education and philosophical foundations of education. The selection criteria were relevance, credibility, and alignment with the research objectives (Bowen, 2009; Sugiyono, 2020).

Data was collected through document analysis. Relevant texts were identified, reviewed, and categorized based on key themes, including the concept of the Among System, the role of educators, the nature of the child, and the principles of early childhood education. The documentation process involved systematic reading, note-taking, and extraction of conceptual data from selected sources to ensure the validity and depth of analysis (Bowen, 2009; Creswell, 2014).

Data analysis was conducted using qualitative content analysis. The collected data were analyzed through several stages: data reduction, data categorization, interpretation, and synthesis. Key concepts from Ki Hadjar Dewantara's Among System were identified and then analyzed in relation to contemporary PAUD principles. The analysis emphasized identifying philosophical meanings, conceptual relevance, and educational implications, which were subsequently synthesized to formulate a coherent understanding of the Among System as a philosophical foundation for Early Childhood Education (Miles et al., 2014; Schreier, 2012).

Result and Discussions

This section presents the result of document analysis including

journal articles and policy-oriented documents provide empirical support, contextual depth, and comparative perspectives that strengthen the discussion of findings. All sources are critically examined through the perspective of Ki Hadjar Dewantara’s Among System, ensuring that the analysis remains aligned with national educational philosophy. Through the integration of classical theory, contemporary research, and culturally grounded educational values, this table functions as a structured reference framework that enhances the academic coherence, validity, and relevance of the study.

Table 1. Mapping of Theoretical Foundation of Ki Hadjar Dewantara’s Among System

No.	Theory	Types of References	Relevance to Ki Hadjar Dewantara's Among System
1	Constructivism (Piaget, 1962)	Book	Aligned with <i>Ing Madya Mangun Karsa</i> , as it emphasizes children as active learners who construct knowledge through direct experience, exploration, and play.
2	Sociocultural Theory (Vygotsky, 1978)	Book	Supports <i>Ing Madya Mangun Karsa</i> , in which teachers act as facilitators who build children's motivation and understanding through meaningful social interaction.
3	Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) (Vygotsky, 1978)	Book	Consistent with <i>Tut Wuri Handayani</i> , as teacher provides gradual support and reduced intervention as children become more independent.
4	Social Learning	Book	Reflects <i>Ing Ngarso Sung</i>

No.	Theory	Types of References	Relevance to Ki Hadjar Dewantara's Among System
	Theory (Bandura, 1986)		<i>Tuladha</i> , in which teachers serve as primary role models and children learn through observation and imitation of behavior.
5	Self-Regulation (Zimmerman, 2000)	Book	Aligned with <i>Tut Wuri Handayani</i> , as it emphasizes the development of independence, self-control, and responsibility in learning.
6	Play-Based Learning (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009)	Book	Supporting <i>Ing Madya Mangun Karsa</i> , by positioning teachers as facilitators who foster motivation and creativity through play.
7	Emotional Competence (Denham et al. 2015)	Book	Relevant to <i>Ing Ngarso Sung Tuladha</i> and <i>Tut Wuri Handayani</i> , because the teacher's role model helps form empathy, emotional regulation, and character in children.
8	Developmental Theory (Berk, 2018)	Book	Strengthening the three principles of the Among System by emphasizing the holistic development of children (social, emotional, cognitive, moral).
9	Developmentally Appropriate	Book	In line with all the principles of the Among

No.	Theory	Types of References	Relevance to Ki Hadjar Dewantara's Among System
	Practice (DAP)		System, because it emphasizes education that respects the developmental stages, individuality, and needs of children.
10	Some Frontiers in Social Science (Heckman, J. J., 2006)	Journal Article	Emphasizes the importance of early childhood education as a foundation for long-term human development, aligned with Ki Hadjar Dewantara's vision of education as a humanizing process.
11	Humanistic spirit of the Among System (Bowen, G. A., 2009)	Journal Article	Reinforces reflective and contextual approaches to understanding educational practice, consistent with the humanistic spirit of the Among System.
12	Early Childhood Care and Education (Gwang-Jo Kim & Umayahara, 2010)	Journal Article	Supports holistic child development (cognitive, social, emotional, moral), in line with Ki Hadjar Dewantara's integrated educational approach.
13	Character Education for Early Childhood (Suyanto, 2012)	Journal Article	Emphasizes the teacher's role as a moral and behavioral role model in shaping children's character.
14	Piaget Versus	Journal	Highlights the teacher's

No.	Theory	Types of References	Relevance to Ki Hadjar Dewantara's Among System
	Vygotsky: Educational Implications (Chi Hyun, C. et al., 2020)	Article	role as a facilitator who nurtures motivation, creativity, and active participation in learning.
15	Starting Strong VI (OECD Publishing, 2021)	Document publication	Stresses supportive interactions, learner autonomy, and the development of children's independence in a safe and responsive learning environment.

The following section elaborates on each theoretical, journal, and policy reference in accordance with the research questions and objectives. Each source is discussed to highlight its conceptual relevance, empirical contribution, and alignment with Ki Hadjar Dewantara's Among System, thereby supporting the study's analytical framework and strengthening the interpretation of the findings.

Ki Hadjar Dewantara's Among System 1: Ing Ngarso Sung Tuladha
 The principle of "Ing Ngarso Sung Tuladha" emphasizes that educators occupy a central position as primary role models in the entire educational process. Dewantara (2004) viewed education as a holistic process of character formation through life experiences, not merely the verbal transmission of knowledge. Therefore, the attitudes, speech, and behavior of educators in their daily lives are the most effective educational medium. This exemplary behavior creates a value-rich

learning environment, where children not only hear what is taught but also see and experience directly how those values are realized.

In the context of Early Childhood Education, this principle holds particularly strong relevance due to the developmental characteristics of children who learn primarily through imitation and observation. Early childhood children tend to imitate the behavior of significant adults around them, particularly educators, who act as authoritative and emotional figures (Bandura & National Institute of Mental Health, 1986). Therefore, educator behavior that reflects empathy, patience, honesty, responsibility, and respect for diversity is a primary means of developing children's character and social values from an early age (Berk, 2018).

Theoretically, Ing Ngarso Sung Tuladha aligns with Vygotsky's view, which emphasizes the importance of social interaction in child development. The concept of the more knowledgeable other positions educators as figures who not only transfer knowledge but also guide children through socially and emotionally meaningful interactions (Vygotsky, 1978). Through warm and responsive relationships, children gain integrated learning experiences across cognitive, social, and affective aspects, enabling holistic and contextual development.

In contemporary early childhood education practice, the application of the Ing Ngarso Sung Tuladha principle serves as an antithesis to the tendency toward early academicization, which positions educators solely as academic instructors. An approach that is

overly focused on academic achievement has the potential to neglect the needs of children's holistic development (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009). Instead, by prioritizing role models, Early Childhood Education learning is directed toward the process of humanizing children, namely fostering character, independence, and social skills as the primary foundation for lifelong learning.

Ki Hadjar Dewantara's Among System 2: Ing Madya Mangun Karsa The principle of "Ing Madya Mangun Karsa" places educators in a strategic position, at the center of children, driving their enthusiasm, motivation, and creativity in learning. Dewantara (2004) emphasized that education should not be authoritarian or place educators at the center of learning. Instead, educators are present to develop children's will and creativity through dialogic and participatory guidance. By being "in the center," educators become part of the learning process, not the sole controller determining the entire direction of learning.

In the context of Early Childhood Education, this principle is highly relevant because children have a natural drive to learn that emerges through play, exploration, and interaction with their surroundings. Early childhood learns actively through direct experience, not through one-way instruction (Piaget, 1962). Therefore, educators need to create a stimulating, safe, and enjoyable learning environment, so that children are encouraged to actively engage, express ideas, and express their creativity according to their interests and needs. Theoretically, "Ing Madya Mangun Karsa" aligns with Vygotsky's (1978) social

constructivism theory, particularly the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Within this framework, educators act as facilitators, providing support or scaffolding appropriate to the child's developmental level. Support is provided flexibly and responsively, allowing children to reach their optimal developmental potential without age-appropriate academic pressures. This approach also aligns with the principles of developmentally appropriate practice put forward by NAEYC (National Association for the Education of Young Children), which emphasize the importance of aligning learning practices with the child's developmental characteristics, individuality, and sociocultural context (NAEYC, 2020).

In addressing the challenges of early academic development, the principles of “Ing Madya Mangun Karsa” offer an alternative framework for Early Childhood Education practices that are more humanistic and process oriented. Learning is not directed at prematurely achieving reading, writing, and arithmetic skills, but rather at strengthening children's intrinsic motivation, curiosity, independence, and active engagement in meaningful learning experiences (Bredekamp, 2018). Thus, Early Childhood Education serves as a solid foundation for holistic child development, while preparing them for further learning without neglecting the essence of childhood.

Ki Hadjar Dewantara's Among System 3: Tut Wuri Handayani The “Tut Wuri Handayani” principle emphasizes the role of educators as

providers of encouragement, reinforcement, and support from behind, so that children have sufficient space to develop independently. Ki Hadjar Dewantara viewed ideal education as liberating, enabling children to grow and develop according to their natural inclinations and individual potential (Dewantara, 2004). Within this framework, educators are no longer the central control center for learning, but rather the ones who ensure children feel safe, valued, and supported in their learning process.

In the context of Early Childhood Education (PAUD), the “Tut Wuri Handayani” principle is closely linked to efforts to foster independence, self-confidence, and decision-making skills from an early age. Children are given the opportunity to experiment, choose, and complete tasks according to their abilities, both in play and in daily activities within the learning environment. Through these experiences, children learn to take responsibility for their choices and develop self-control, which is an important foundation for social and emotional development (Denham et al., 2015) .

Theoretically, this principle aligns with Vygotsky's view on the importance of gradually reducing support as a child's competence increases. When a child is able to perform an activity independently, the educator's role shifts from providing direct assistance to being a facilitator who provides encouragement and reinforcement (Vygotsky, 1978). This view also aligns with the NAEYC's developmentally appropriate practice principles, which emphasize that children need to

be given opportunities to explore, make choices, and learn from real-life experiences as part of a healthy and sustainable development process (NAEYC, 2020).

In addressing the challenges of early academic development, the “Tut Wuri Handayani” principle serves as a critique of early childhood education practices that overly control, standardize, and suppress children’s learning. The emphasis on responsible freedom and proportionate support helps create a learning environment that values the uniqueness of each child. Thus, early childhood education is positioned as a humanistic, child-centered learning space oriented toward learning freedom, not merely achieving short-term academic goals.

Contextualizing Ki Hadjar Dewantara’s Among System in Contemporary Early Childhood Education Practices Building upon the philosophical foundation discussed in the previous section, this part focuses on how Ki Hadjar Dewantara’s Among System can be contextualized within the micro-level practices of contemporary Early Childhood Education (ECE). Rather than reiterating macro-level challenges, the discussion emphasizes how the Among System informs educators’ professional roles, classroom interactions, and pedagogical decision-making in everyday PAUD settings. In this sense, the Among System functions not merely as an ideological framework, but as a practical guide for improving pedagogical quality and learning experiences.

In Indonesian PAUD classrooms, Ing Ngarso Sung Tuladha can be contextualized through educators' professional dispositions and daily interactions with children. For example, when educators model respectful communication, patience during conflicts, and consistency in classroom routines, they establish social norms that children internalize through observation. Such practices are evident during circle time discussions, peer conflict resolution, or collaborative play activities. From a theoretical perspective, this aligns with sociocultural theory, which views learning as embedded in social relationships (Berk, 2018; Vygotsky, 1978). The implication for educational quality is the creation of a positive classroom climate that supports children's social competence and emotional security, which are essential conditions for meaningful learning.

The principle of Ing Madya Mangun Karsa is reflected in how educators facilitate learning activities while remaining actively involved alongside children. In many PAUD contexts, this can be observed during play-based or thematic learning, where educators join children in constructing block structures, exploring natural materials, or engaging in role play. Rather than directing outcomes, educators observe, pose guiding questions, and provide materials that extend children's thinking. This practice resonates with constructivist and inquiry-based learning theories, which emphasize children's active role in knowledge construction. Its implication for educational quality lies in enhanced engagement, creativity, and motivation, as learning

becomes a shared and meaningful process rather than a teacher-dominated activity (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009; Piaget, 1962).

Meanwhile, Tut Wuri Handayani can be contextualized within classroom management and formative assessment practices. In contemporary PAUD settings, educators increasingly rely on observation and documentation of children's learning processes. Applying Tut Wuri Handayani, educators gradually reduce direct assistance, allowing children to choose learning centers, manage simple responsibilities, or solve problems independently. For instance, children may be encouraged to negotiate roles during cooperative play or decide how to complete a task, while educators provide encouragement from a distance. This approach is theoretically supported by concepts of gradual release of responsibility and self-regulated learning. The implication for educational quality is the development of children's autonomy, confidence, and sense of agency (Zimmerman, 2000).

Overall, contextualizing the Among System in contemporary PAUD practice strengthens the alignment between educational philosophy and classroom realities. By informing educator professionalism, interaction patterns, and assessment approaches, the Among System contributes to a more reflective, responsive, and child-centered learning environment. Thus, Ki Hadjar Dewantara's educational philosophy remains relevant not only as a historical legacy, but as a living framework that enhances the quality and integrity of Early Childhood Education practices in Indonesia today.

Conclusion

This study concludes that Ki Hadjar Dewantara's Among System provides a coherent and relevant philosophical foundation for Early Childhood Education (ECE) by positioning children as active subjects of learning and educators as ethical guides, facilitators, and supporters of development. The principles of Ing Ngarso Sung Tuladha, Ing Madya Mangun Karsa, and Tut Wuri Handayani emphasize exemplary conduct, motivational facilitation, and the cultivation of children's independence, all of which align with the developmental characteristics of early childhood. The findings further indicate that the Among System can be effectively contextualized within contemporary PAUD practices at the micro level of classroom interaction, curriculum enactment, and formative assessment. When applied consistently, this framework strengthens reflective pedagogy, responsive teaching, and learning environments that respect children's individuality and agency, reaffirming Ki Hadjar Dewantara's philosophy as a living and applicable framework rather than a historical legacy.

The implications of this study extend to pedagogical practice, educator professionalism, and institutional development. At the pedagogical level, the Among System reinforces the importance of relational quality, child participation, and learning processes as key indicators of educational quality. In terms of educator professionalism, it highlights the need for early childhood educators to develop ethical awareness, reflective capacity, and a deep understanding of children's

developmental nature, beyond technical instructional skills. At the institutional level, the Among System supports the design of learning environments and assessment practices that emphasize growth, autonomy, and meaningful learning experiences rather than rigid outcomes.

Based on these conclusions and implications, several recommendations are proposed. Early Childhood Education institutions are encouraged to integrate the principles of the Among System into daily teaching practices, classroom management, and assessment approaches. Teacher education and professional development programs should incorporate Ki Hadjar Dewantara's educational philosophy, particularly the Among System, as a core component of early childhood educator preparation. Finally, future research is recommended to examine the empirical implementation of the Among System through classroom-based and qualitative studies, in order to strengthen the evidence, base for its application in contemporary Early Childhood Education.

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