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# The Pedagogy Inherent in Japan's Early Childhood Education Curricula by Bibliometric Analysis

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**ABSTRACT**

The establishment of the Child and Family Agency in 2023 marked a critical turning point in Japan's early childhood education and care (ECEC) system. However, systematic empirical evidence on the pedagogical foundations of of Japanese ECEC curricula remains limited. This study employs a systematic bibliometric review aimed at exploring the structural characteristics and dominant pedagogical frameworks of ECEC curriculum under institutional transformation. In accordance with the PRISMA guidelines, a comprehensive literature review of 972 papers identified by the Publish or Perish tool with a focus on Google Scholar was conducted, encompassing publications from 2022 to 2025. The primary research instrument employed was VOSviewer, a software program designed for analysing scientific literature. This software enabled the execution of two key research methodologies: keyword co-occurrence mapping and conceptual clustering.The findings reveal that pedagogy, curriculum and children are the central pillars of the Japanese ECEC curricula. Distinct conceptual clusters emerge, including the close association between play and care, as well as patterns reflecting indirect education (*Kansetsu Kyoiku*). Additionally, a significant discrepancy is observed between the national curriculum and its implementation in practice. In conclusion, this study offers three key contributions. Firstly, it provides a visual taxonomy that bridges the gap between abstract national policy and actual research trends. Secondly, it identifies a significant conceptual discrepancy between the 'intended curriculum' and the 'practised curriculum', highlighting a critical area for future qualitative inquiry. Finally, it provides an empirical basis for culturally embedded educational logics, thereby offering a new theoretical framework for international comparative ECEC research.

**Keywords:** Japanese kindergarten curriculum, Pedagogical Identity, Indirect Education, Learning through Environment.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Japanese early childhood education and care (ECEC) system has recently garnered significant international attention for its child-centered pedagogical approach (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 2021). However, Japan faces profound systemic challenges that resonate with global educational dilemmas. While over 90% of children aged 3 to 5 are enrolled in ECEC facilities, achieving universal (100%) enrollment remains an elusive goal, leaving a vulnerable segment of the population underserved (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports and Technology (MEXT), 2018). Furthermore, the socio-economic status of preschool educators and the persistent wage gap compared to other professions are critical concerns

(National Institute for Educational Policy Research, 2018). Against this backdrop, Japan is undergoing a period of structural transformation, symbolised by the establishment of the Child and Family Agency in 2023. It signifies a national commitment to ECEC reform that transcends traditional ministerial boundaries and bureaucratic silos (The Cabinet of Japan, 2021a).

This transition entails the complex coexistence and integration of conventional kindergartens and nurseries within the "Integrated Centre for Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)," reflecting a move toward administrative unification (The Cabinet of Japan, 2021b). It is essential to recognise that this structural integration of nursery and kindergarten has been debated since the Meiji period (1868-1912), when nurseries and kindergartens were established as separate systems (Noda, 2010). Currently, Japan's preschool education facilities are categorised by the governing body into three primary types: kindergartens under the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), and both nurseries and integrated children's centres under the recently established Child and Family Agency (CFA). The 2023 reform, therefore, is not merely a bureaucratic shift but a historical resolution of a long-standing academic and social conflict regarding the nature of early childhood (Noda, 2010).

To ensure conceptual clarity in this complex institutional landscape, this paper establishes specific terminological definitions based on the prevalent academic discourse. This study uses the term 'kindergarten' to encompass various forms of childcare settings, without distinguishing significantly among kindergarten (*youchien*), nursery schools (*hoikujyo*), and childcare centres (*takujisyo*), reflecting their shared functional role in the current welfare-education nexus. Furthermore, the term 'Integrated centre for early childhood education and care (ECEC)' is employed to refer to the *youho renkei gata nintei kodomo en*, representing the hybrid nature of these institutions. Within the broader definition of curriculum studies, these facilities are governed by three distinct guidelines: the Kindergarten Education Guidelines, the Nursery Care Guidelines, and the Integrated Centre Guidelines, which were revised and standardised in 2017 to ensure a degree of pedagogical coherence (Koyama, 2017; Uchida, 2020). Despite this standardisation, the legal basis for each remains distinct, leading to the perception that childcare is in a state of disarray, as the notion of childcare is becoming increasingly complex to comprehend (Kamiduki, 2023).

Despite the extensive range of qualitative studies conducted on Japanese educational methodology, there is a paucity of research that has comprehensively integrated data on the evolution of the curriculum research field (Akita et al., 2007). Conventional comparative education research on Japan has been noted for its tendency toward detailed description and limited theoretical reference, focusing primarily on institutional levels rather than pedagogical methodology (Yamada, 2016). Furthermore, studies on early childhood education account for a small fraction – approximately 2% – of the total extant literature on Japanese education (Hamano, 2021; Yamada, 2016). However, the 2023 study stated that research based on the premise that the curriculum has been harmonised across infant education and childcare facilities, including kindergartens and nurseries, is on the increase (Nakata et al., 2023). The lack of systematic integration poses a significant challenge for international researchers seeking to understand the structural changes and thematic shifts in the Japanese ECEC landscape. Consequently, there is an urgent need for a methodologically rigorous review that can map the intellectual territory of Japanese ECEC and provide a clear trajectory of its scholarly development.

Bibliometric analysis provides a robust framework for understanding the structure of research themes and identifying emerging trends from a large and complex body of literature (Donthu et al., 2021). However, metadata downloaded from literature search sites frequently

contains a substantial amount of inappropriate or duplicated information, necessitating a transparent and systematic filtering process (Odu et al., 2024). The present paper employs a PRISMA-based bibliometric analysis in order to ensure methodological robustness and transparency, thereby minimising the risk of bias that is inherent in traditional narrative reviews (Page et al., 2021; Tricco et al., 2018). The employment of visualisation techniques, such as keyword co-occurrence mapping, facilitates the objective identification of the "conceptual core" of the field and its peripheral emerging topics (Donthu et al., 2021). Such a scientific approach is vital for moving beyond descriptive accounts and providing an empirical foundation for future comparative education research and international ECEC policy discourse.

The scientific contribution of this research comprises two aspects: firstly, it addresses Japan's regional context; secondly, it contributes to the broader international discourse on early childhood education and curriculum reform. Firstly, an examination of academic literature from 2022 to 2025 was conducted, with the objective of providing empirical evidence. This analysis resulted in the highlighting of uniquely Japanese educational rationales, such as "indirect education" and "education through the environment". Secondly, by demonstrating how cultural and historical contexts – which are often overlooked in standardised international assessments – shape the "curriculum in practice", it challenges universalist assumptions in curriculum research (Martín-Alonso et al., 2021; Sato et al., 2017). By visualising the discrepancy between policy-driven frameworks and practised pedagogies, this research challenges ECEC systems. This analysis emphasises the significance of investigating culturally specific educational methodologies in the worldwide pursuit of educational quality and equity.

The primary objective of this study is to systematically elucidate the characteristics of Japanese research on early childhood education curriculum through a comprehensive bibliometric mapping approach. In order to achieve this objective, the study will address the following three primary research questions: (1) Identify the principal themes and pedagogical concepts that have emerged in recent academic literature on the curriculum for ECEC in Japan; (2) Establish visual representations of the relationships between the identified keywords and the pedagogical concepts; (3) Conceptualise the relationship between the national curriculum, as revised in 2017, and practical pedagogical approaches; and (4) Facilitate a re-examination of novel research topics and their practical implications for the future of early childhood education policy and international comparative education. The objective of this research is to furnish practitioners, policymakers, and international researchers seeking to comprehend the intricate interplay of culture, policy, and educational practice with valuable insights. The present study conducts a comprehensive conceptual analysis of the current state of early childhood education in Japan, based on data.

## 2. METHODS

The study employs a mixed-methods research design, integrating a systematic literature review (SLR) with quantitative bibliometric analysis. Adhering to the PRISMA 2020 guidelines (Kamioka et al., 2021; Page et al., 2021), this dual approach ensures methodological rigour, transparency, and reproducibility. The qualitative synthesis identifies thematic patterns and contextual factors within Japanese ECEC pedagogy, while the bibliometric analysis provides a quantitative mapping of research clusters and evolving academic discourses. This integrated strategy is intended to minimise subjectivity and enable a comprehensive identification of "research gaps" that warrant further inquiry. This paper applies a bibliometric analysis through a systematic literature review. The following are some steps in the method used in this study.

**2.1 Review Selection Criteria**

To ensure consistency with the research objectives, the following eligibility criteria were strictly applied:

a. Peer-reviewed: Only scholarly articles published in peer-reviewed journals were included to ensure data quality.
b. Timeline: Publications from 2022 to December 2025 to capture the latest discourse following recent Japanese policy shifts.
c. Source Type: Primary empirical studies only. Secondary data (Scoping/Systematic reviews) were excluded to avoid "double-counting" in bibliometric mapping.
d. Context: Research must specifically focus on Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) within the Japanese educational context.

**2.2 Search Strategy and Data Sources**

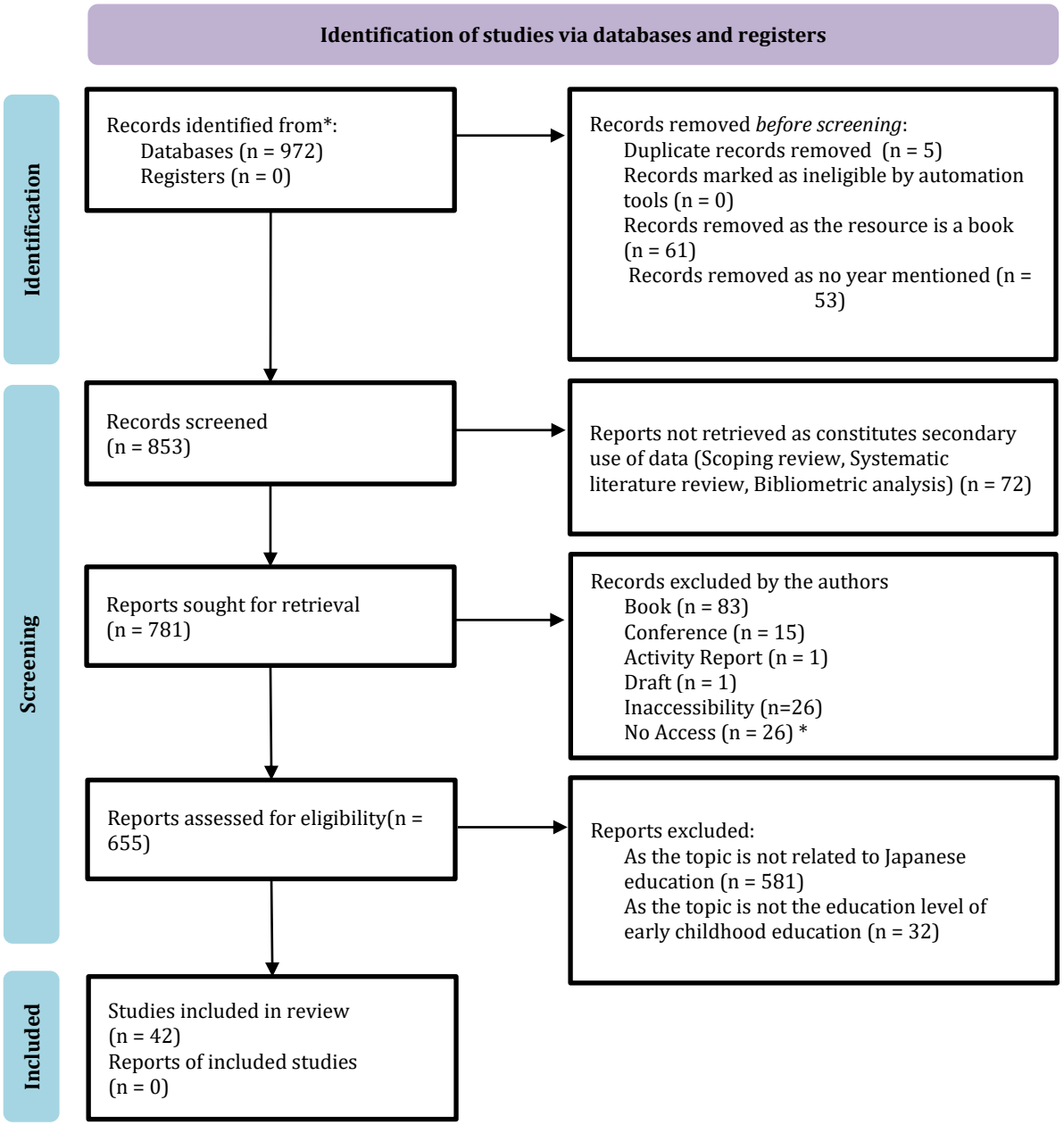
In order to reduce the impact of data source bias, a comprehensive search was conducted on December 8, 2025, using the Publish or Perish software. Google Scholar was selected as the primary database due to its superior coverage of Japanese-language academic bulletins and regional journals, which are often underrepresented in Scopus but critical for capturing the "pedagogical logic in Japan". The search strings comprised combinations of: "Pedagogy", "Japan", "Curriculum", and "Early Childhood Education" in the paper's title. The maximum output data count was set to 1,000. The search yielded 972 results.

**2.3 Data Extraction**

a. Identification (972 items identified)
   Prior to screening, a total of 5 (five) duplicate records were identified and subsequently removed using Mendeley Data. Furthermore, based on peer-review criteria and data-acquisition considerations, 61 "book" resources and 53 records with blank "year" fields were deleted en masse without any content review.
b. Initial Screening (Subjects: 853)
   A total of 72 papers that met prerequisite (3) for secondary data use and employed methodologies such as Scoping Review, Systematic Literature Review, or Bibliometric Analysis were excluded.
c. The Second Screening (781 items)
   Titles, abstracts, and linked information from Publish or Perish were subjected to screening. The author proceeded to delete data for a total of 83 newly identified books, 15 conference proceedings and abstracts, 1 (one) activity report, and 1 (one) paper draft. Furthermore, 26 papers were deleted due to inaccessibility. This included items with incorrect links, literature in languages other than English, Japanese, or Indonesian for which content review was impossible, and papers in which the resource itself was unclear.
d. The third screening (655 items).
   In accordance with prerequisite (4) of the Japanese education context, 581 papers were excluded. In addition, 32 papers were excluded because early childhood education was not among the research subjects.

The 42 papers that met the predetermined criteria through the screening process were reviewed. At this stage, it should be noted that no screening was conducted to determine whether

the papers mentioned the Japanese curriculum or focused specifically on pedagogy, as shown in Figure 1.




* No access includes: the link was unavailable, the language other than Japanese, Indonesian and English, no resource data found.

**Figure 1.** PRISMA 2020 Flow Diagram

## 2.4 Bibliometric Analysis Procedures (VOSviewer)

To ensure the reproducibility of the bibliometric mapping, the following parameters were applied in VOSviewer (version 1.6.20):

a. Type of Analysis: Co-occurrence analysis was performed using "All Keywords" as the unit of analysis.
b. Counting Method: The Full Counting method was employed to assign equal weight to each occurrence.
c. Thresholding: A minimum keyword occurrence threshold of 2 was set to ensure the inclusion of emerging terms while filtering out noise.
d. Purpose of Visualizations:
    1) Network Visualization: To identify the structural "conceptual core" and clusters of the research field.
    2) Overlay Visualization: To track the chronological evolution of keywords and identify the latest research trends (2022–2025).
    3) Density Visualization: To highlight the "intellectual density" and dominant themes (e.g., 'Care' and 'Environment') within the Japanese ECEC discourse.

## 3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### 3.1 Publication Trends and Influence

Of the 42 papers analysed, Bautista et al. (2024) recorded the highest citation count at 114 (Table 1). After analysing productivity and influence power (Takahashi, 2021), we present the mapping results and analyse those findings. The literature extracted in this paper is from 2022 onward, with a distribution across 2022-2025 (Table 2). 19 out of 42 studies are conducted in Japan, followed by those conducted by researchers from Australia, China and the United States. Regarding the regional overview, five papers came from Northern European countries. As demonstrated in Table 3, a significant proportion of the journals in which these papers were published are internationally recognised academic journals, including Sustainability (Q1) and Comparative Education (Q1).

**Table 1.** Top 10 Cited Articles

| No | Cites | Authors | Title | Year | Source | Publisher |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 114 | Bautista et al. | Music in early childhood teacher education: Raising awareness of a worrisome reality and proposing strategies to move forward | 2024 | Arts Education Policy Review | Taylor & Francis |
| 2 | 46 | Hosokawa et al. | Enhancing social-emotional skills in early childhood: intervention study on the effectiveness of social and emotional learning | 2024 | BMC psychology | Springer |
| 3 | 45 | Iwasaki | Effects of environmental education on young Children's water-saving behaviors in Japan | 2022 | Sustainability | Multidisciplinary Digital Publishing Institute (MDPI) |
| 4 | 30 | Akiba | Computational thinking and coding for young children: A hybrid approach to link | 2022 | Education Sciences | Multidisciplinary Digital Publishing Institute (MDPI) |

| No | Cites | Authors | Title | Year | Source | Publisher |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | unplugged and plugged activities | | | |
| 5 | 18 | Gunnestad et al. | Values in Early Childhood Education (ECE): A cross-cultural comparative study of values for ECE expressed in policy documents | 2022 | ECNU Review of Education | SAGE |
| 6 | 16 | Nakatsubo et al.a | Why Don't Japanese Early Childhood Educators Intervene in Children's Physical Fights? Some Characteristics of the Mimamoru Approach | 2022 | Early Childhood Education Journal | Springer |
| 7 | 15 | Hayashi | Teaching expertise in three countries: Findings and policy implications from an international comparative study in early childhood education | 2022 | Comparative Education | Taylor &Francis |
| 8 | 15 | Bang et al. | L2 learning outcomes of a research-based digital app for Japanese children | 2024 | Studies in Second Language Acquisition | Cambridge University Press |
| 9 | 14 | Matsumoto et al. | Pedagogical photo documentation for play in early childhood education and care | 2023 | Early Years | Taylor &Francis |
| 10 | 11 | Friman et al. | Nurturing Eco-Literate Minds: Unveiling the Pathways to Minimise Ecological Footprint in Early Childhood Education | 2024 | Social Sciences | Multidisciplinary Digital Publishing Institute (MDPI) |

**Table 2.** Year of Issue

| Year | No. of literatures |
|---|---|
| 2022 | 14 |
| 2023 | 7 |
| 2024 | 9 |
| 2025 | 12 |
| Total | 42 |

**Table 3.** Countries of Literature

| Rank | Country | Area* | No. of Literatures |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Japan | Eastern Asia | 19 |
| 2 | Australia | Australia and New Zealand | 3 |
| 3 | China | Eastern Asia | 3 |
| 3 | USA | Northern Amerika | 3 |
| 5 | Finland | Northern Europe | 2 |
| 5 | Norway | Northern Europe | 2 |
| 5 | Phillippines | Southeastern Asia | 2 |
| 8 | Georgia | Western Asia | 1 |

| Rank | Country | Area* | No. of Literatures |
|---|---|---|---|
| 8 | Indonesia | Southeastern Asia | 1 |
| 8 | Israel | Western Asia | 1 |
| 8 | Kazakhstan | Central Asia | 1 |
| 8 | Malaysia | Southeastern Asia | 1 |
| 8 | New Zealand | Australia and New Zealand | 1 |
| 8 | Sweden | Northern Europe | 1 |
| 8 | Uzbekistan | Central Asia | 1 |

*The area division was based on the UN's M49 Standard (United Nations, n.d.).

**Table 4.** Top 5 Journals/Bulletins and the indicators

| No | Journals/Bulletin | Publisher | Country | No. of Literatures | SJR2024 | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Sustainability (Switzerland)* | Multidisciplinary Digital Publishing Institute (MDPI) | Switzerland | 3 | 0.688 | Q1 |
| 2 | Annual Bulletin of the Japanese Society for the Study of Teacher Education | Japan's teacher education research body | Japan | 2 | | |
| 2 | Comparative Education* | Routledge | UK | 2 | 1.237 | Q1 |
| 2 | Docens Series in Education | Docens Journal | India | 2 | | |
| 2 | Early Childhood Education Journal* | Springer | Netherland | 2 | | |
| 2 | Journal of Early Childhood Research* | SAGE | UK | 2 | | |

### 3.2 Bibliometric Mapping Analysis

The overall landscape of the research field is captured through three primary visualisations (Figures 2, Figures 3, and Figures 4). The keyword co-occurrence analysis, based on a minimum threshold of two occurrences, identified 37 significant terms categorised into six distinct clusters (see Table 5).

a. Evolution of Research Trends (Overlay and Density Analysis)

The Overlay Visualisation (Figure 3) reveals a clear chronological shift in research priorities. Whilst studies undertaken in 2022–2023 were characterised by international comparisons and pedagogy, publications scheduled for 2025 (indicated in yellow) demonstrate an increasing focus on "educational goals," "philosophy," and "case studies." This development signifies a progression in the field, transitioning from general comparative descriptions to an examination of the philosophical underpinnings of kindergarten practice. The Density Visualisation (see Figure 4) further corroborates the intellectual core. The highest concentration of research (indicated by intense yellow) is centred around the tripartite nexus of 'Early Childhood Education,' 'Japan,' and 'Pedagogy.' This demonstrates that the literature is not merely reporting practices but is fundamentally concerned with the pedagogical logic inherent in the Japanese context.

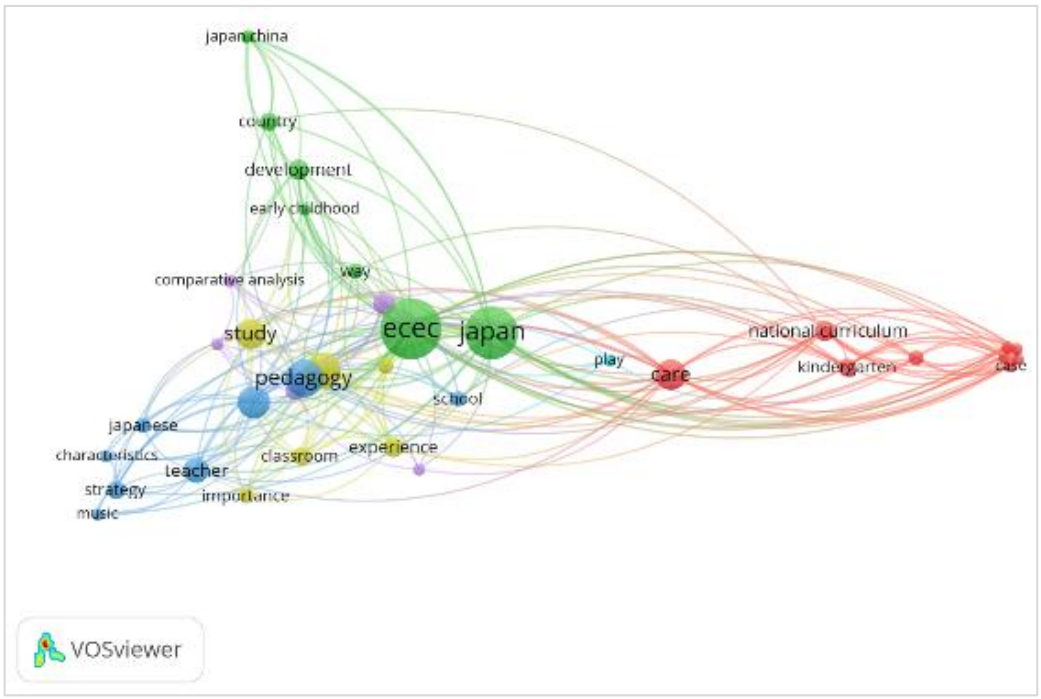



**Figure 2.** Network Visualisation

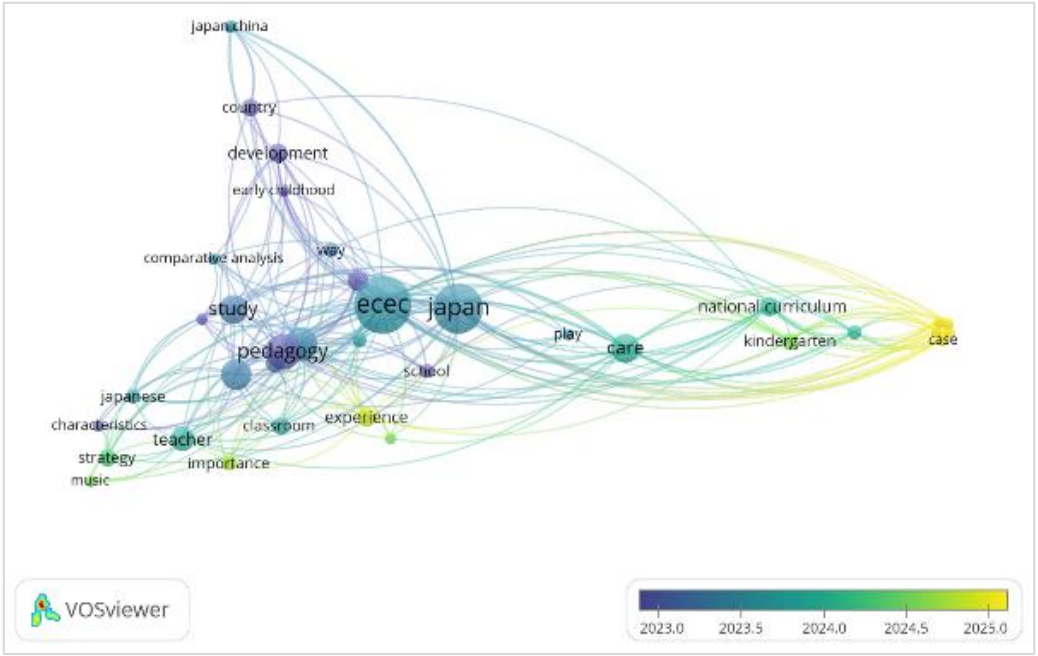



**Figure 3.** Overlay Visualisation

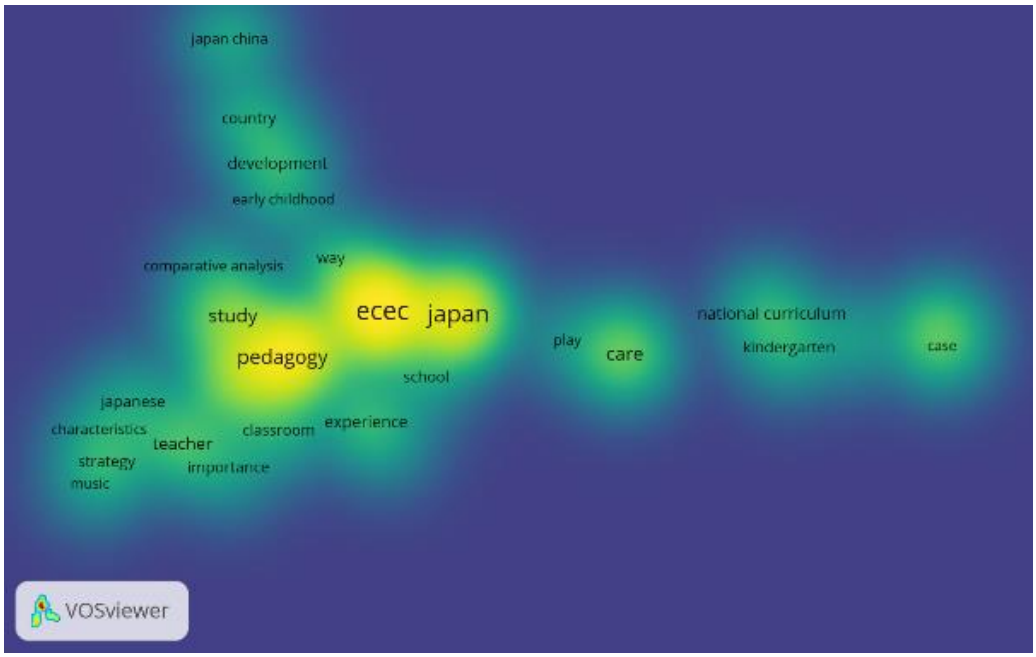



**Figure 4.** Density Visualisation

b. Inter-Cluster Relationships and Pedagogical Logic

The co-occurrence analysis of 37 keywords resulted in six clusters (Table 5). The following sections integrate these bibliometric indicators with qualitative interpretations of Japanese pedagogical logic. Cluster 6 comprised only the term 'play'. Although it was considered part of the same category as 'pedagogy' or 'practice', I ultimately decided to establish it as an independent cluster. The reason for the independence of the word 'play' in early childhood education is that 'play' is synonymous with 'learning,' and the Japanese curriculum framework is mainly used to illustrate the interconnectedness between 'learning' through the correlation diagram. Educational goals are fully met through play-centred instruction, encouraging learning through play as a natural activity of the child (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 2021).

**Table 5.** Cluster and Keywords

| Cluster | Colour | Keyword | Total |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Red | Care, case, educational philosophy, environment, kindergarten, national curriculum, pedagogical goal, space | 8 words |
| 2 | Green | Country, development, early childhood, ECEC (early childhood education (and care)), Japan, Japan-China, United States, way | 8 words |
| 3 | Blue | Characteristics, curriculum, Japanese, music, pedagogy, school, strategy, teacher | 8 words |
| 4 | Yellow | Child, classroom, experience, importance, research, study | 6 words |
| 5 | Purple | Activity, comparative analysis, paper, practice, quality | 6 words |
| 6 | Light blue | Play | 1 word |

1) Education through the Environment (Cluster 1)
   As shown in Figure 5 and Figure 6, 'Kindergarten' and 'National Curriculum' are positioned at the structural core of Cluster 1. The central placement of 'Environment' between these terms empirically substantiates the Japanese principle of 'Education through the Environment' (MEXT), 2018; Ministry of Education Culture Sports and Technology (MEXT), 2017). The approach to environmental education in Japan is based on the expectation that early childhood education and care should be provided from the child's perspective. The role expected of staff is to provide a supportive environment that encourages children to initiate and develop activities they have chosen themselves (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 2021).
2) 'Care' as a Bridge (Cluster 1 & 6)
   A particularly salient finding concerns the mediating role of 'care'. As Figures 6 and 11 show, 'care' links key concepts such as 'pedagogy', 'curriculum', and 'child' with institutional terms including 'kindergarten' and 'national curriculum'. This indicates that care operates as a conceptual bridge connecting practice, policy, and pedagogy, rather than a peripheral value. The proximity of "play" to "care" empirically supports the view that children's learning in Japan is inseparable from teachers' relational and emotional engagement. This finding is consistent with Noddings' assertion that caring relationships form the basis of meaningful education (Mondal & Ghosh, 2025; Noddings, 1992), and is in line with current debates on democratic and relational pedagogy (Kitayama et al., 2022; Mondal & Ghosh, 2025).
3) Pedagogy, Children, and the Logic of Indirect Education (Clusters 3 & 4)
   In Cluster 3, the proximity between 'Pedagogy', 'Child', and 'Activity' (Figure 7 and Figure 8) indicates that Japanese scholarship conceptualises learning as a lived experience enacted through daily activities. A particularly salient finding is the absence of a direct link between 'Child' and 'Play' (Figure 9). Rather than a lack of play-based learning, this spatial gap reflects the traditional philosophy of 'Indirect Education' (*Kansetsu Kyoiku*). As articulated by Sozo Kurahashi, educational intent is embedded in the teacher-designed environment rather than through direct instruction (Murai, 2022; Uchida et al., 2025). 'Indirect Education' by Sozo Kurahashi is the same concept of 'Education through the Environment' (Kuwahara, 1992). The bibliometric mapping confirms that this "indirect" relationship remains the dominant pedagogical structure in the current literature.
4) The Disconnect between 'Curriculum' and 'National Curriculum' (Clusters 3 & 4)
   A significant conceptual divide was identified through the distance between 'National Curriculum' and 'Curriculum' (Figure 11). While the 'National Curriculum' is clustered with administrative terms, the generic term 'Curriculum' is positioned closer to teachers and pedagogy (Figure 7). This distinction provides empirical evidence of the gap between the 'intended curriculum' (policy level) and the 'lived/practised curriculum' (classroom level) (Martín-Alonso et al., 2021; Sato et al., 2017). This suggests that current ECEC research in Japan prioritises how teachers interpret and reconstruct policies in their local contexts, highlighting the agency of practitioners in the face of national frameworks.

5) The Disconnect between 'Curriculum' and 'National Curriculum' (Clusters 3 & 4)
The overlay visualisation (see Figure 5) demonstrated that research by 2025 had undergone a shift towards "educational objectives" and "philosophy". Yamada (2016) observed that conventional comparative education research on Japan up to 2011 has been characterised by a tendency towards detailed description, limited theoretical grounding, and a focus on institutional and structural levels rather than classroom practice or pedagogical methodology. The 2025 shift in research focus towards "educational goals" and "philosophy" suggests a verification grounded in the theoretical basis of Japan's child-centred approach. Within the context of the recently established Child and Family Agency, these findings arguably advocate for a qualitative evaluation system that respects the integrated nature of "play and childcare" and the qualitative "living curriculum", rather than rigid institutional compliance.

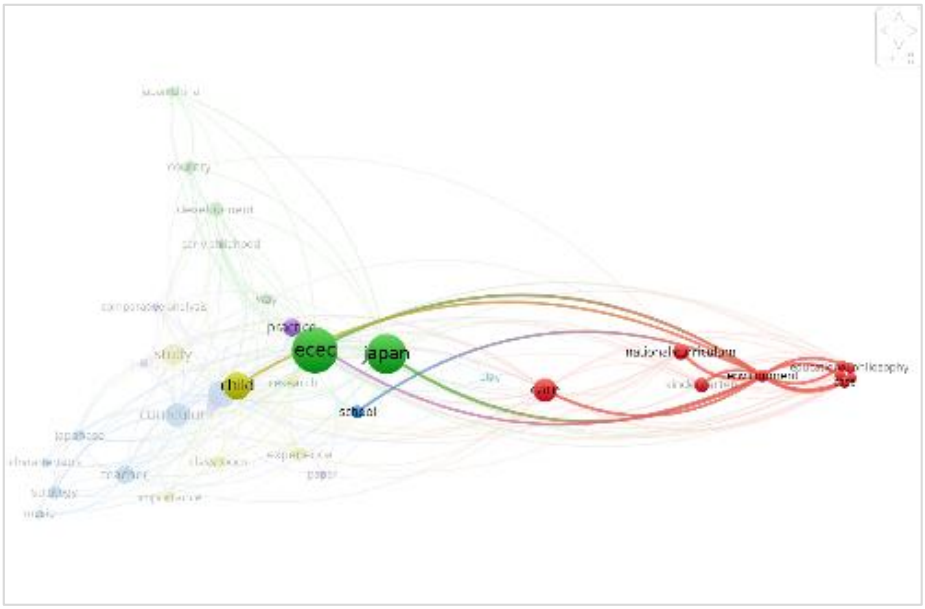



**Figure 5.** Cluster 1 (red): Centre of the cluster. 'environment'.

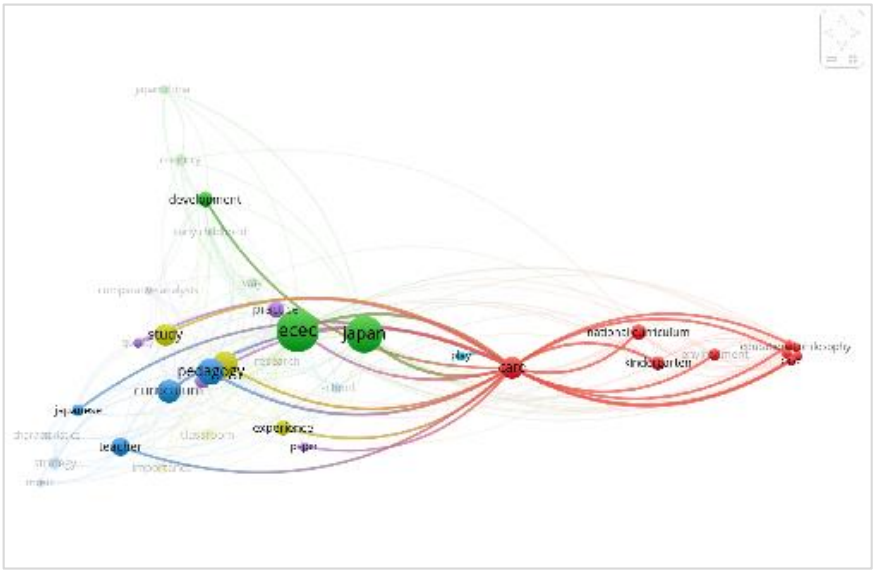



**Figure 6.** Cluster 1 (red): 'Care' formulates the relationship with other clusters.

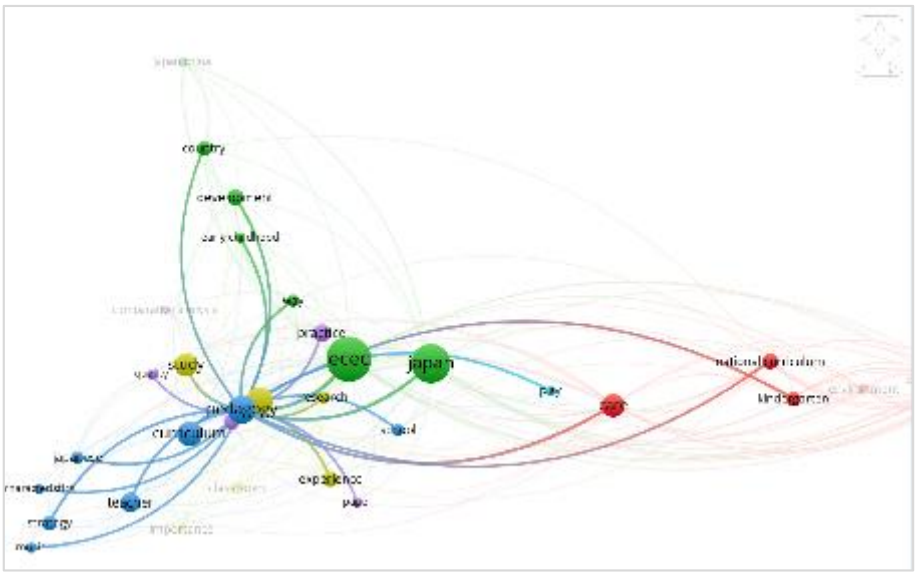



**Figure 7.** Cluster 3 (blue): Pedagogy links to every other cluster**.**

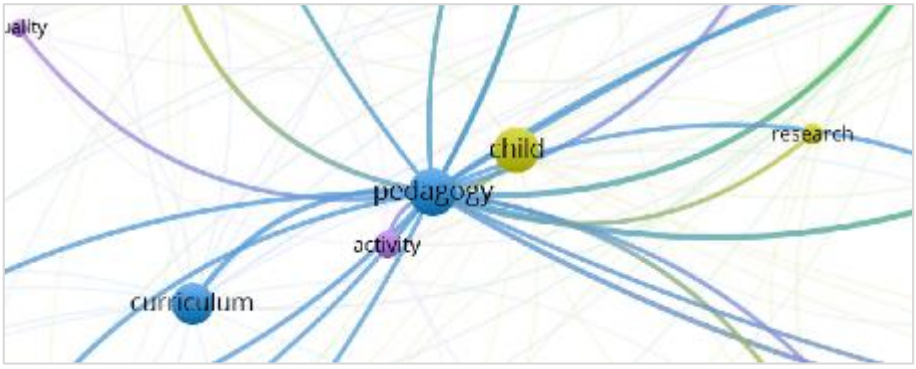



**Figure 8.** Cluster 3 (blue): Cluster 4's 'child' and Cluster 5's 'activity' are adjacent to 'pedagogy'

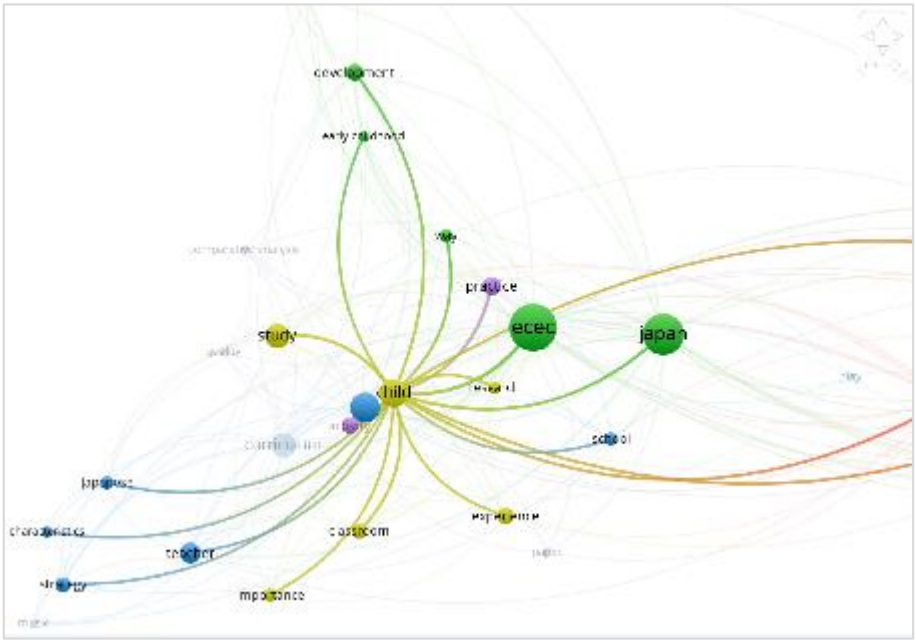



**Figure 9.** Cluster 4 (yellow): The centre is a 'child' to relate to other clusters.

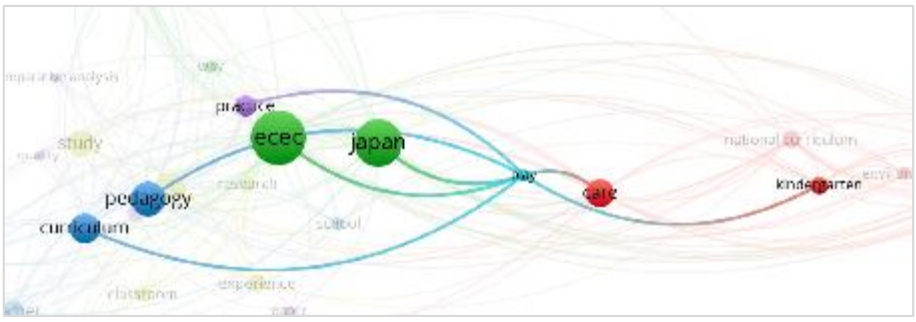



**Figure 10.** Cluster 6 (light blue): 'Play' is essential to connect 'care', 'pedagogy', 'curriculum' and 'practice'.

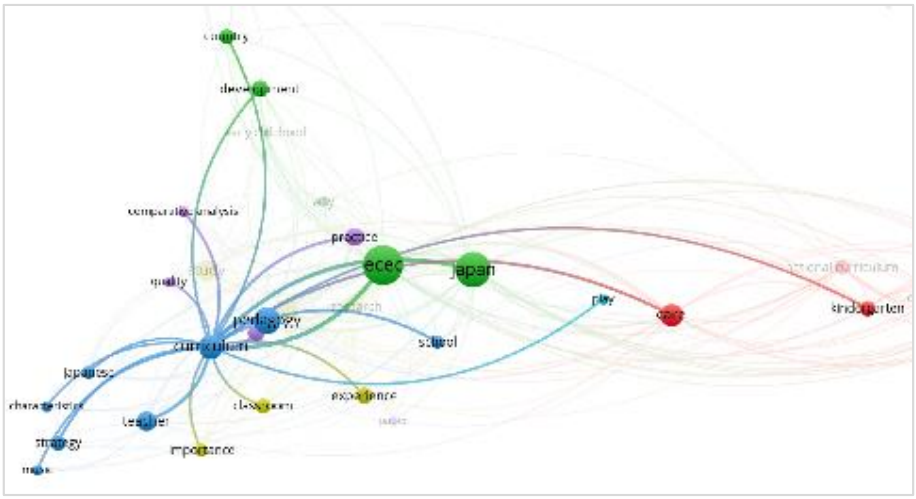



**Figure 11.** The term 'Curriculum' is not related to 'National Curriculum'.

## 4. CONCLUSION

This study systematically elucidated the pedagogical characteristics of Japan's ECEC curricula through bibliometric analysis. The findings provide empirical evidence of a child-centred philosophy, in which the concepts of 'pedagogy', 'curriculum', and 'children' are inextricably linked through caring relations and the environment. The primary scientific contribution of this research lies in its empirical substantiation of 'indirect education' (*Kansetsu Kyoiku*) and the 'play-care' nexus. The present study employs visualisation techniques to demonstrate that Japanese pedagogy prioritises children's agency within teacher-mediated environments over direct instructional methods. This challenges the universalist curriculum assumptions and offers a theoretically grounded framework for international comparative ECEC research. Moreover, the discrepancy between the 'national curriculum' and the 'lived curriculum' that has been identified serves to emphasise a significant gap in existing scholarship that requires further examination. The results of this study emphasise the significance of environmental design as a pedagogical tool for ECEC practitioners and policymakers. In the context of the recently implemented administrative framework of the Child and Family Agency, these findings call for the establishment of a curriculum evaluation system that prioritises the 'practiced curriculum' – the qualitative experiences of children – over mere institutional compliance.

The following agenda is proposed for the purpose of establishing a framework for future research. While the bibliometric approach provides a structural overview, it is limited in its ability to explain the micro-level processes of curriculum implementation. Consequently, future research

should employ qualitative case studies to explore how individual teachers interpret and reconstruct the national curriculum in their daily practice. Overall, the empirical insights provided by this study deepen international understanding within curriculum research and call into question universalist assumptions that overlook culturally embedded pedagogical logics. By foregrounding the philosophical and cultural foundations of early childhood education in Japan, this research underscores the decisive importance of historical and cultural context in educational inquiry.

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