

# Integrating John Locke's Philosophy Through Inquiry-Based Learning in Early Childhood English Education

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## Abstract

The current development of education influenced by various factors including philosophy, including John Locke. On the other hand, global development demand human to master international language. This study explains the implementation of John Locke's philosophy in the Inquiry-Based Learning in Early Childhood English Education. The research uses a qualitative method, including semi-structured interviews with three teachers at TK XYZ in Depok, along with literature review to strengthen the theoretical foundations of John Locke's philosophy. The findings show that IBL for early childhood English education can be integrated with John Locke's philosophy, which emphasizes freedom, experience, and the integration of moral value. The teachers at TK XYZ integrate moral values as an essential aspect to foster empathy and respect among living beings, encouraging children to become moral individuals and to improve students contextual understanding in English conversation. This study concludes that Locke's philosophy provide a foundation for implementing IBL, thereby improving the quality of Early Childhood English Education through the combination of cognitive learning and moral values. This approach demonstrates the potential for integrating Locke's philosophy into modern pedagogical practices, offering insights for English educators to support the balanced growth of children.

**Keywords:** John Locke; Inquiry-Based Learning; Early Childhood English Education

## INTRODUCTION

Global development has driven a rising demand for individuals to master foreign languages beyond their native tongues, with English emerging as a dominant international language. In Indonesia, this trend has fostered an increasing emphasis on learning English from an early age, especially within early childhood education settings. As many schools now offer English language programs for young children, the importance of these formative years for language development is widely recognized. Research from Dolean (2015) supports the notion that early language acquisition significantly contributes to cognitive development, social skills, and overall academic readiness.

The current development of education is influenced by various aspects, one of which is philosophical. Education can be shaped by the perspectives of philosophers, providing a foundational basis for its evolution. Modern education transforms with the role of philosophy, offering an ethical grounding that underpins educational implementation and policy (Sulianta, 2020). Philosophical views evolve with contributions from philosophers, notably during the Renaissance and Enlightenment periods. Ahmad & Ismail (2024) argue that during the Renaissance, educational thought became more diverse. Figures like John Locke introduced ideas emphasizing children's natural experiences and growth. Moral and ethical values from thinkers like Locke can serve as educational guides to shape qualities aligning with the expectations of students, teachers, and society.

John Locke's concept of empirical education emphasizes rationality and experience as processes for understanding the real world. Locke views education as a means to grant individual freedom

to develop potential. His ideas on education are outlined in his work *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, providing specific guidance on raising children as moral and responsible individuals. Locke asserts:

**“Virtue... the ‘hard and valuable part,’ harder to acquire than ‘a Knowledge of the World”** (*Some Thoughts*, §70).

Thus, Locke’s educational philosophy holds deep significance, extending beyond academic learning to the shaping of children's character. He discussed the importance of guidance for children’s growth—intellectual, moral, and social. In *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690), Locke introduces the idea of *tabula rasa*. He explains his argument, stating:

**“Let us then suppose the mind to be, as we say, white paper, void of all characters, without any ideas. How comes it to be furnished? ... To this I answer, in one word, from experience”** (*Concerning Human Understanding*, 104).

Locke suggests that children are born as blank slates, and their character and knowledge are shaped by experience. He believes that through experiences, exploration, and a positive environment, children can develop strong character traits, such as curiosity, self-discipline, and critical thinking (Duschinski, 2012). Humans have the ability to shape, control, and develop themselves as whole individuals, learning through sensory experiences (Siddiq & Salama, 2018). Locke's views on education align with the primary role of Early Childhood Education in shaping morals, values, and social skills, which influence individuals' future development by fostering curiosity. Children enter school with experiences from their surroundings, a natural curiosity, and a desire to understand causes and the functioning of things (Martin, 2001).

In practice, the Inquiry-Based Learning (IBL) model aligns with John Locke's views. According to Adeyele (2023), IBL is a pedagogical approach that facilitates students in actively constructing knowledge through problem-solving, critical thinking, questioning, and hands-on experiences. Such direct experience can serve as a foundation for knowledge, allowing individuals to continue developing throughout life. This aligns with John Locke’s philosophy, providing a framework for how IBL can foster knowledge and moral growth in students. A study related to students freedom in Locke’s philosophy from Bynum (2021) mentions that Locke's focus on liberty and free choice advocates for creating an environment where children are supported in exploring ideas, posing questions, and addressing challenges based on their personal interests and needs. This approach is in harmony with contemporary educational models such as Inquiry-Based Learning, which fosters active involvement and independent learning. Moreover, Wale (2020) studies in undergraduate students shows that engaging in Inquiry-Based Learning helps students improve their skills in critically assessing information and constructing well-supported arguments. This approach is recommended for fostering the development of critical thinking, as it strengthens key cognitive abilities such as analysis, evaluation, and reasoning. Furthermore, A study by Aroh and Wagozie (2021) highlights the enduring relevance of Locke's educational philosophy in, particularly its practical approach and understanding of the essential role of guided learning in a child's holistic development in Nigeria. The authors suggest that Locke’s philosophy should be more widely adopted as a framework for creating child-centered educational curricula. This approach would support the structured, developmental needs of students in modern education, enhancing both their cognitive and psychosocial growth.

However, there has been no study exploring the connection between Inquiry-Based Learning (IBL) and John Locke's philosophy in early childhood English education. Based on this background, the study focuses on applying John Locke's educational perspectives within IBL in Early Childhood English Education. The goal is to explore the application of Locke’s educational philosophy, the Inquiry-Based Learning approach, and the integration of Locke’s educational philosophy with early childhood English education.

## METHOD

In this study, the researcher employs a qualitative research method that includes interviews and literature review to explore the application of John Locke's educational philosophy to character development through the Inquiry-Based Learning (IBL) model at the early childhood level in TK XYZ, Depok. Qualitative research aims to achieve an understanding of particular meanings and behaviors experienced in sociological phenomena through participants' subjective experiences (Giorgi, 2018).

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with one teacher from each level: one playgroup teacher, one kindergarten A (KG A) teacher, and one kindergarten B (KG B) teacher. According to Omola & Nicole (2021) semi-structured interviews help maintain focus and ensure that the interview meets its objectives. The questions designed are primary ones, supplemented by follow-up questions that relate to the main inquiries. The aim of these semi-structured interviews is to gain insight into how Locke's philosophy and the IBL approach are implemented in classroom practices and their impact on children's character development.

The interview findings will be transcribed, with essential points identified and highlighted. These insights will then be reinforced through a literature review, focusing on the educational philosophy of John Locke. Synth (2019) states that literature review serves as a basis for developing conceptual models or new theories and helps in mapping research developments. In this study, the literature review supports data from interviews by examining various sources related to John Locke's educational philosophy, IBL principles, and previous research relevant to early childhood character development. Combining interviews with literature review is expected to provide a comprehensive understanding of implementing IBL in education based on Locke's philosophical perspectives, as well as how it contributes to character formation in students at TK XYZ, Depok. This research aims to provide practical recommendations for educators and stakeholders to improve education quality at the early childhood level.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Results

The literature review revealed several insights into John Locke's philosophy and its connection to Inquiry-Based Learning (IBL). The interview questions were designed based on these findings to explore and discuss the literature results in a more contextual and practical manner. A semi-structured interview was conducted by asking four questions to three teachers, each representing a different level at TK XYZ. To anticipate the teachers' limited knowledge of the philosopher John Locke, an explanation of his philosophy was provided beforehand. The researcher inquired about how the concepts of John Locke are applied in teaching Inquiry-Based Learning in the classroom. John Locke believed that experience is the key to all knowledge, and we gain this knowledge through our senses. He thought that education should focus on learning from real-life experiences instead of just reading books (Mondue et al., 2024). Locke believed that hands-on learning helps students understand and remember things better. A question arises from the literature finding about how teachers can involve students' experiences as a learning resource in Inquiry-Based Learning.

**Question 1: John Locke's philosophy emphasizes the importance of experience as a source of knowledge. How do you incorporate experience into Inquiry-Based Learning (IBL) activities in early childhood English education?**

Playgroup Teacher: I often connect the lessons to my own experiences as well as those of others. Since it's still Playgroup, we typically use videos from others to help the children understand the concept better. Particularly in our class, where English is the primary language, children sometimes struggle to express their experiences.

Therefore, videos and images are highly beneficial in helping them understand the topic being discussed, enabling them to relate it to their own experiences.

KG A Teacher: For KG A, the children already have more experiences. For topics related to daily life, we usually use storytelling. The students comprehend the Character Development lesson well through Inquiry Based Learning. Even though KG A students started to communicate well in English, they may still encounter limitations in expressing themselves in English. Despite they had various experiences related to our topic, they may find it challenging to articulate their thoughts and ideas to a more complex dialogue.

KG B Teacher: In KG B, this year, our IBL activities are focused on plants. To provide the children with hands-on experience, we encourage them to plant in both soil and hydroponic media, and they take care of the plants every Thursday and Friday. We integrate our IBL to our Character Development lesson if it is possible. The diverse topics and direct experiences in our English language environment significantly enhances students' vocabulary development. Children are more likely to comprehend and remember new words when they are encountered in meaningful, real-world contexts.

From the statements above, it is evident that all teachers at each level incorporate the aspect of experience into Inquiry-Based Learning (IBL). Dikutip dari Rorty (1998), John Locke wrote in his book *Two Treatises of Government* that children have free will.

**'after that, the Father and Son are equally free as much as Tutor and Pupil after Nonage' (II: 59).**

This quote explains that children are no longer under the control of their parents. This concept reflects Locke's view of individual freedom and the autonomy from authority. Based on the statement above, the researcher then inquired about the aspect of freedom in John Locke's philosophy.

**Question 2: Not only about experience, John Locke also emphasizes the importance of freedom in learning. Do you provide children with the freedom to choose and develop their interests in inquiry-based learning in the classroom? How do you implement this freedom with IBL in early childhood English education?**

Playgroup Teacher: The current Merdeka Curriculum supports Inquiry-Based Learning in the classroom. However, at the Playgroup level, we usually introduce children to various learning methods since they are not yet able to make choices on their own. We still focused on directly providing learning media, such as flashcards and games, to support English-language learning in our class.

KG A Teacher: KG A is currently learning about stories. We usually give the children the freedom to explain the story they read through various forms of media, such as singing or retelling the story. Allowing freedom within the discussed topic can help children feel less pressured and make them more comfortable expressing their ideas in English.

KG B Teacher: In KG B, we still face some challenges in giving the children complete freedom because the assessments are usually predetermined. This term, the syllabus has already set that the children will present their work in front of their parents. Thus, we provide flexibility by allowing students to present the points they choose within the topic already studied. Given that each child's English proficiency varies, we aim not to impose difficulties or restrict their freedom to express themselves.



This statement highlights teachers' growing awareness of the importance of allowing freedom in children's learning. These teachers provide freedom in English language learning, tailored to each child's abilities, and aim to avoid causing stress with English instruction in early childhood education classrooms. Based on this, teachers may connect character education with Inquiry-Based Learning by designing activities that encourage exploration, reflection, and personal responsibility. The role of the teacher in character education is to guide children in controlling their impulses as a fundamental trait, so that reason and rationality dominate their thinking. This is because children's moral development is closely linked to their ability to manage their desires. Locke supports this idea by stating:

**“One positive result of denying children’s appetites is to teach them modesty” (§107).**

This emphasizes the importance of self-control and moderation in the development of moral character in children. It shows that the role of a teacher is to teach children to control their desires and impulses through the use of reason, in order to shape good moral character and make ethical decisions. From the statement above, the researcher then explores teachers' point of view on how to connect character education with Inquiry-Based Learning in the early childhood English classroom.

**Question 3: According to Locke, virtues include respect and kindness, which support moral values. How to integrate IBL with character development in the early childhood English classroom?**

Playgroup teacher: For IBL in the classroom, we have learning objectives related to attitudes in the syllabus. For this semester's lesson on self-awareness, we strive to teach the children that we need to respect ourselves by not lying, honoring our friends, and playing together.

KG A Teacher: At our school, as you know, there is a special subject called Character Development. Typically, to align with our lesson on stories, we read stories from books and engage the children in discussions about what lessons can be learned from the story. This approach also allows us to assess their English comprehension within the discussed context and incorporate evaluations of attitude through English-language storytelling.

KG B Teacher: Each semester has its own specific lessons. For this semester's Character Development lesson, the goal is for the children to understand aspects of respect and confidence. We encourage the children to learn how to show respect to living beings, such as by taking care of plants, and help them understand that plants also serve as a habitat for animals. We strive to integrate both cognitive and attitudinal aspects at the end of our learning sessions.

The statement highlights that teachers consistently set learning objectives related to students' attitudes and values. Each teacher ensures that character education is included at the end of each classroom session. Teachers can also assess the children's understanding of English within the given context, for instance, through storytelling or the Character Development subject.

The last, the researcher inquire about promoting critical thinking and questioning skills through Inquiry-Based Learning in early childhood English Education. According to Ghaemi & Mirsaeed (2017) on their research about impact of Inquiry-Based Learning to English for Foreign Language (EFL) Students, Inquiry-based tasks keep students involved in learning for long enough to yield meaningful results, fostering an environment where creative thinking can thrive as students are encouraged to think independently and critically. It is in-line with John Locke philosophy that emphasis on involvement and observation.

**Question 4: John Locke stated that children learn through direct experience and observation. How can Inquiry-Based Learning help develop children's critical thinking skills?**

Playgroup Teacher: It is quite challenging to encourage Playgroup children to ask questions. So far, we haven't set the expectation that the children will ask questions. Usually, we ask the children questions by first providing example answers ourselves. For instance, in a lesson about hot and cold, we explain that fire and sunlight are hot, while ice and snow are cold. Gradually, the children begin to understand the concepts of hot and cold. Then, we ask them, "What about boiling water? Is it hot or cold?" We always use repetition to ensure that the children understand the vocabularies.

KG A Teacher: Certainly, Inquiry-Based Learning (IBL) aligns well with John Locke's principles, especially as he emphasizes critical thinking. In our IBL lessons, we usually provide learning resources such as videos, images, or stories. Then, we pose a triggering question to encourage the children to inquire further. This is how we approach the IBL. The learning resources we provide serve only as a stimulus, as children at the KG A level are already capable of communicating using simple English sentences.

KG B Teacher: In the classroom, we do not treat the students as mere children. Our students are considered discussion partners, allowing both students and teachers to ask questions and even express disagreements. They usually feel more valued when the tone of the teacher's conversation with other teachers is not different from the way the teacher speaks to them, as they feel they are no longer children. This approach allows them to think critically and improve their contextual understanding of English. Additionally, they learn how to respect others' opinions and accept differing viewpoints.

The data indicates that the teachers at TK XYZ implement Inquiry-Based Learning (IBL) in alignment with John Locke's philosophical principles. Teachers at each level in TK XYZ highlights distinct elements of Inquiry-Based Learning (IBL). The Playgroup teacher leverages visual media to link English learning with students' experiences, enhancing understanding in areas where verbal skills are still emerging. In KG A, storytelling and character education encourage English comprehension while allowing children the freedom to select their preferred form of expression. KG B incorporates more advanced experiential activities, such as hands-on planting, where students expand their vocabulary through direct involvement. Across all levels, teachers adopt a supportive approach to language instruction, fostering individual expression and easing pressure, aligning well with Locke's principles of freedom and respect in education.

**Discussion**

Based on the data above, the implementation of inquiry-based learning aligns with the principles of John Locke's philosophy, which emphasizes freedom, critical thinking, experience, and character education. There are four main points related to the application of Locke's philosophy and its connection to character education at TK XYZ. First, TK XYZ emphasizes experience as a primary source of knowledge. According to Mondue et al. (2024), Locke emphasizes the importance of education in fostering independent thinking, rather than relying on innate ideas (innatism). Learning through both theoretical and practical methods is used to shape each child's learning approach. At TK XYZ, teachers connect the learning topics with the students' experiences in the classroom to make it easier for children to grasp the subject matter in English. This aligns with Ade (2022), who states that in Locke's view, knowledge is

fundamentally rooted in experience rather than originating from inherent ideas. His educational philosophy rests on the belief that learning should be an active, exploratory process shaped by direct engagement with the world that are all gained through experiential learning. This approach supports the development of critical thinking, as students learn by doing and reflecting, thereby deepening their understanding and fostering a lifelong curiosity (Ade, 2022). In this context, Inquiry-Based Learning (IBL) in early childhood English education facilitates children's understanding through experiential learning. This aligns with research from the Reggio Emilia Australia Information Exchange (2011), which states that classroom learning encourages children to explore subjects that support cognitive and linguistic development through personal experiences. This approach helps children connect learning to their real-life experiences, enhancing comprehension and curiosity throughout the learning process. Second, from the interview findings, it can be seen that TK XYZ provides children the freedom to choose learning materials that they feel are suitable, as long as these align with the established learning objectives. TK XYZ avoids a passive learning model that relies solely on the teacher as the main source of knowledge. This approach aligns with John Locke's principle:

**'For Law, in its true Notion, is not so much the Limitation as the direction of a free and intelligent Agent to his proper Interest' (TII: 57) cited in Rorty (1998).**

John Locke's concept of freedom in education can be interpreted as recognizing the student's autonomy to develop while guiding students toward an ethical understanding. This aligns with the approach at TK XYZ, which, although it allows children the freedom to choose how they express their ideas, ensures that this freedom is oriented around the topic being studied. Tuan (2021), learner autonomy is considered essential for effective English language acquisition, as it is a key characteristic of successful language learners. Consequently, cultivating high levels of autonomy among students is a highly desirable goal in English Language education programs. It is in-line with Locke that believed that education should not simply transmit knowledge passively but should involve students actively, encouraging them to explore ideas within a framework that promotes both autonomy and ethical growth.

Third, TK XYZ integrates moral values at the end of teaching-learning activities. Teachers add moral values through a variety of activities, supporting Locke's belief that education plays a crucial role in developing moral character. For instance, lessons on respect are paired with hands-on activities, like caring for plants, which highlight the importance of respecting all living things as part of building character. Last, Inquiry-Based Learning enhances students' critical thinking skills by encouraging them to engage in discussion and articulate their reasoning. This also supports the development of contextual understanding and the enhancement of children's English language skills, in line with the research by Wale et al. (2020), which states that Inquiry-Based learning is recommended as a method to enhance students' critical thinking abilities because it fosters essential cognitive skills, including interpretation, analysis, evaluation, inference, explanation, and self-regulation. These skills are foundational to critical thinking and are strengthened through the active, reflective engagement encouraged by this approach. According to Rorty (1998), Locke views children as rational beings. This aligns with the approach of teachers at TK XYZ, who treat students as discussion partners and treating children as discussion partners allows them to express their opinions, even disagreeing with topics discussed in class. This approach encourages open dialogue and critical thinking, allowing children to feel empowered in sharing their thoughts and perspectives, thus promoting students to develop their critical thinking skills.

## CONCLUSION

It can be concluded that inquiry-based learning at TK XYZ aligns with John Locke's philosophy, which emphasizes experience as a primary source of learning, freedom, critical thinking, and character education. This approach, focused on these aspects, allows early childhood English students to meaningfully engage with topics by connecting them with contextual experiences, hands-on involvement, and reflective critical thinking. The element of freedom enables children to explore appropriate ways to express their ideas, provided they remain aligned with the topic being studied. Through inquiry-based learning, moral values can be integrated by embedding moral and ethical values in each topic, allowing cognitive and English Language development to occur alongside moral growth. This fosters a more active learning environment, supporting independence and respect for other living beings. Therefore, it can be concluded that an inquiry-based learning model can be integrated with John Locke's philosophical principles to add moral values and develop students' vocabularies and English contextual understanding in the classroom.

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