

Embracing balance in early childhood education: the case of awakening to languages pedagogy

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Abstract: In view of the drastic changes prompted by globalisation, the educational institution is more than ever concerned with preparing future generations to grapple with the new exigencies. Among the emerging ideas that may benefit such endeavour is embracing balance as a fundamental concept in early-years curricula where academic achievement and personal fulfilment even out in primacy. Building on an account of the Tunisian preschool experience as a case in point, the present paper offers a rationale for a vision that promotes balance in response to the fuzziness plaguing this educational sector. It therefore opts for the awakening to languages pedagogy as an approachable illustration of such vision among others.

Keywords: early childhood education; ECE; awakening to languages; ATL; personal fulfilment; balanced curriculum.

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1 Introduction

Early childhood education (ECE) in Tunisia has scarcely made it onto the radar of most educational researchers. Comparably enough, related areas, such as applied linguistics, have been more often than not confined to advanced age segments (e.g., international students, newly-landed immigrants, or adults engaged in language-for-vocational purpose programs). Considering the dearth of research attendant to this area, the present paper sheds light on early-years education in Tunisia from an insider's standpoint building both on my practitioner experience and my current interest in foreign language learning and teaching. The paper opens with a detailed account of this educational state of affairs, with a special consideration being given to the key stakeholders involved in policy making and spawning generations of early-years educators.

This overview points to the lack of a consistent vision undergirding this educational sector insofar as the child, the educator, and the pedagogical practices are concerned. This reality reflects a *zeitgeist* plainly detached from the new educational paradigms that strive to develop a sustained picture of a well-rounded 21st child model with the capacity to think critically, creatively and cooperatively. Hence, the paper embarks on a case-making effort through embracing balance as an alternative to the dominant discourse that advocates achievement at the expense of personal fulfilment. After addressing the theoretical accounts underlying this approach, it highlights the expediency of balance to the established domains of child development: physical, socio-affective and mental. It concludes with early foreign language learning, particularly the awakening to languages (ATL) approach, as a case illustration to verify the feasibility of such a model.

2 A spotlight on Tunisia's ECE

2.1 Background

ECE in Tunisia revolves around three main educational institutions: the kindergarten (N = 4,005, 70% enrolled), the *koutteb* (N = 1,380, 12% enrolled), and the preparatory school (N = 2,055, 18% enrolled).¹ Kindergartens are administered by the Ministry of Women, Family, and Childhood. According to the Pedagogical Guide of 1987, this institution is purported to engage children in socio-educational activities to help them develop their mental, psychomotor, social and affective skills. The *koutteb* is a parallel educational body running under the custody of the Ministry of Religious Affairs. It offers an essentially religious schooling, basically the recitation of the Quran in a Madrassa-like style. The preparatory school, run by the Ministry of Education, is primarily concerned with preparing five-year olds for the upcoming academic phase. This body is physically accessible in both kindergarten spaces and primary-school surroundings.

One issue that transpires from this outline is the lack of a coherent perspective over ECE, as evidenced by the sector's uncoordinated administration by three ministries. By way of illustration, kindergartens are regulated by a ministry whose core interest rests on social commitment to family affairs and the child being part of the whole. Worse though, those schooled in the *koutteb* exclusively in mosques – pedagogically inconvenient sites lacking basic schooling standards – are hardly watched over by any control body in a state that supposedly promotes secular values (Ben Miled et al., 1985). The lack of a national strategy also inheres in the absent will to make preschool compulsory rather than a privilege where only four out of ten children are schooled by the three above-mentioned educational bodies. Such disproportional representation of schooling attendance extends to the differences between the underprivileged areas in the deep west of the country (17%) and urban areas (60%). Added to that is the privatisation of the ECE sector since the 1990s which operates relatively off the watch of a supervisory body.

Issues attendant to the quality of human resources and educator training add to this chaotic picture. Out of the 11,055 practitioners working in kindergartens, only 1,220 received advanced training (2014 Ministry of Women, Family, and Childhood Report), where the rest received little, non-specialised, or no training in any way. As to such training, it was exclusively offered by the Institut Supérieur des Cadres de l'Enfance which accepts students freshly graduated from secondary schools in a program spanning over three years. In fact, the core of the training program, essentially geared to the needs

of the job market, does not seem to be undergirded by a coherent and dependable theoretical substrate, so much so that the curricular orientations and the faculty fabric reflect this sense of incoherence (see Ben Maad, 2014). In fact, much of the available coursework and even full specialty tracks are tailor-made in accordance with the academic interests of some faculty members.²

2.2 *ECE vision deficiency*

From all the chaos reported presently, it follows that the crux lies in the absence of a clear vision over three ECE constituents: the child, the educator and pedagogy. First, there is a distorted view of the child being a learning device purported to get ready for school, not life.³ Second, the vocational factor weighs heavily in the collective psyche of the faculty, seeing model educator more of an individual mastering a set of skills to accommodate the job market than a process of growth into educational leadership. Third, the mainstream pedagogical practice lends itself to the ‘academisation’ of the learning experience (Kirchner, 2011; Marcon, 2012). Numeracy and literacy consume the pedagogical agenda of educators so as to ‘streamline’ children’s skill set for a solid start in their future academic life. A noteworthy example of such ‘hothousing’ practice is the teaching of English from an age point as early as four years on the premise that an early acquisition of such languages would serve as an asset in later stages of their education (Ben Maad, 2014).

The triad of custodian ministries follows a braid of disparate discourses in their take on ECE affairs. As to the Ministry of Women, Family, and Childhood, there is some tendency to focus on social issues such as child protection, seeing the socially-driven priority to support the most vulnerable segments of society like women and children. The educational matter does not seem to rank high on its priority checklist. Differently enough, the Ministry of Religious Affairs’ discourse is premised on the question of identity, thus consolidating the cultural values of Islam onto generations presumably susceptible to losing such values to the competing ideas emanating from the Western culture. When it comes to the Ministry of Education, the scholastic proficiency-oriented spirit prevails. Its discourse consists in the consolidation of numeracy and literacy skills to prepare children for the impending ‘race’ towards academic excellence (Kirchner, 2011).

Another share of responsibility for such visionary deficiency falls onto the shoulder of the related scholarly circles that hardly see ECE as a multi-disciplinary research field. A case in point is the country’s sole child-focused tertiary institution. Therein, it was not always heart-warming to advance any cross-disciplinary projects (Ben Maad, 2014). Cross-disciplinarity is also of peripheral importance in terms of hiring novice academics. New openings are hence filled by academicians scantily interested in this educational sector. The recruiters would consider eligibility for such openings based on how well a candidate is doing in his/her research area, regardless of whether it is related to the child as a focal point. With such corporatist mood, it would seem untenable to advance a standard and coherent vision where the child concept is exclusively pulled towards a given discipline while discounting others.

3 The 21st century child: surviving globalisation

Human history has witnessed a breakthrough in its dynamics of development. Wars and cultural transformations are now being determined by the new powers of corporate world. Our lifestyles have changed accordingly, and so has our collective psyche. The changes are such that today's children are the most susceptible to such changes. The fast-paced educational environment, fully reflective of this new reality, exerts aberrant pressure on children pushing them into unhealthy life patterns. Early-years education, especially in the third-world countries such as Tunisia, does little to address the issue of adversity facing children. Evidence for such vulnerability abounds on such behavioural distortions as depression. In view of that, Ferrari et al. (2013) reported that the depression level in the North African countries, exceeding the proportion of 7% across their populations, ranked as the highest in the world against a global average of 2.5%. In view of these alarming figures, the mainstream educational system would – together with or independently from other variables – have a good share of responsibility.

One factor that may explain this aberrant picture is the hegemony of a culture of excellence that engages the key educational stakeholders in these countries from parents to curriculum designers. In an out of the preschool environment, children's educational experience seems to be shaped by a 'more-is-better' attitude where priority is fully given to the academic attainment of literacy and numeracy (Ben Maad, 2014). Instead, two major elements are deemed indispensable at such tumultuous time: the promotion of children's well-being and the skills needed to acclimate to the new world challenges. Well-being constitutes an overriding component of ECE curricula in Europe and North America. It refers to the development of positive affect confidence, satisfaction, pro-social attachments, self-regulation, etc. Educators should accordingly develop an environment where children need to think creatively, also to be valued, empowered, and socially engaged, so as to feel positive about themselves and their environment. The sum of such experiences would strengthen their resilience and resourcefulness.

Surviving today's multiple challenges also requires a suitable skill set which recent ECE literature foregrounds as its prime objective (Kumar, 2016). In this purview, a number of lead organisations and policy-makers associated with educational matters (e.g., the Council of Europe and the US National Education Association) have made tremendous strides in terms of theorising and planning. Under the guardianship of the Council of Europe and in association with the US Department of Education and other organisations, the Framework for 21st Century Learning platform – jointly with the effort of practitioners, research specialists and community leaders – was held to hammer out a vision of learning that ties in with the globalisation-triggered challenges of today (Partnership for 21st Century Learning, 2017). This platform encapsulates the target competencies into four master skills – namely the four Cs: critical thinking, communication, collaboration and creativity. Where the implementation of this framework has become a standard citation in cutting-edge curricula around the world, it has been still on the margins of interest in Tunisia's ECE circles.

Research has attested to the bearing of these skills on strengthening children's resilience and resourcefulness. There are in this vein some research accounts on the negative correlation between critical thinking and extremism; that is, when an educational

system does not promote critical reflection, it may well spawn impressionable minds and streamline the process of radicalisation. Rose (2015), in this purview, maintains that irrespective of the schooling level of achievement, there is a tendency among those who pursue science education to adopt radical ideologies. Evidence of such assertion comes from the studies reported by Schwartz (2008) on medical students and by Gambetta and Hertog (2017) on engineering students. The latter characterise an *engineering mindset* according to three dimensions: *monism* (i.e., ‘why argue when there is one best solution’), *simplism* (i.e., ‘opt for easy solutions’) and *preservatism* (i.e., ‘truth is eternal and must be preserved’). Such *forma mentis*, Rose (2015) continues, is nourished by the educational diet provided by curricula that encourage cognitive closure and aversion towards ambiguity.

On the reason why Tunisian Jihadists in the Syria-based Islamic state group ranked the second highest in number across the Arab world, Rose (2015) notes that the majority received advanced education since the “Tunisian educational curriculum in science, math and technical disciplines [which] does not generally give students analytical or research skills or the ability to do critical thinking.” His account ties in with Davies’ (2008) in the sense that schooling diet offered by scientific disciplines makes students invariably anchored in a dualistic view of the world, and hence stuck into essentialist identities. Nonetheless, to the entrenchment of absolutism in these young minds, globalisation appears as a destabilising factor of secularisation and relativism, causing them a good deal of disarray and anxiety that may well turn into violent forms of expression.

Equally, consolidating one’s resilience among the four ‘Cs’ is the master skill of creativity. In an increasingly convoluted and demanding world, thinking creatively is more of a survival tool than a dispositional attribution. This intellectual resource may help children develop a multifaceted approach to life, imbuing them with an expediency to figure out many-sided and innovative ways to address issues that are ever more dynamic and diverse (Merrotsy, 2017; Selby et al., 2005). In the case of Tunisia, creativity does not seem to catch enough imagination among educationalists given its rigid association with and confinement to the field of arts (Ben Raies, 2017). Failure to revisit our view of this skill as a form of resilience may figure in our misleading responsiveness to issues such as unemployment and job creation. Where the mainstream analysis of such issue remains politically-loaded, reducing unemployment to bad governance in terms of adult training policy, the cause may well be couched in the roots of early-years education.

Investing in resourcefulness and creativity does not seem to garner the attention of Tunisian educationalists. A noteworthy rationale for such argument lies in Ben Salem’s (1994) observation that Tunisian engineers do not nourish the cult of innovation and creativity. Ben Raies (2015), building on a recent report by the OECD (2015), also maintains that it is not the quantity of the courses which constitutes the problem nor is the quality of savoir they receive. The weaknesses of graduates would come from the failure of creativity and the entrepreneurial spirit, which may highly explain their difficulty to adapt to the changing exigencies of market economy. In fact, it follows that the deficit is rooted far back in their early formative years where little effort exerted to engage their creative reflexes. In view of their packed literacy and numeracy focused schedules, such reflexes which thrive in an environment of freedom and well-being would unwittingly congeal, or at least decelerate.

4 Balance as a frame of reference

The above account of Tunisia's ECE state of affairs may warrant child-focused scholarship to focus on articulating a new pedagogical platform inspired by the philosophy of balance. Despite the related allusions in few curricular projects such as that of the State Board of Education in North Carolina (NC Department of Public Instruction, 2003) and a number of ECE training programs in North America and Europe (e.g., Berkley's Early Childhood Education Program), the concept of balance did not seem to catch the imagination of the research mainstream. Marcon (2012), in her large-scale survey across the USA, referred to such imbalance with focus being skewed to the 'academisation' rather than personality-building. She noted that such wave of academisation generally witnessed in the chartered preschools is in part a reflection of academia's disproportionate focus on literacy research. The issue may well be justified by the theoretical grounding of balance.

The concept of balance has a perennial presence throughout the history of literature, perhaps from the times 'Nothing in excess' was inscribed on the walls of Apollo temple in Greece to today's New Age movement. In that Aristotle's *golden mean* stands for moderation as the barometer of moral behaviour where extremes, no matter how they may sound tempting every so often, always epitomise deficiency and occasion counterproductive behaviour. Balance reflects a relativistic view of knowledge tightly associated with postmodern thinking. The idea of balance intimates some tendency to stand away from any fixation with a given idea or an established theory. This also lends itself to the developmental research and theory which constituted constant tributaries to mainstream ECE curriculum design and related practices worldwide. In fact, such theories provide one angle on how child development unfolds in a predictable way (Ryan and Grieshaber, 2005).

Alternatively, postmodernists do not capitalise on the value of predictability in child development. Ryan and Grieshaber (2005), in this respect, call for a paradigm shift from the universalist claims cultivated by renowned researchers such as John Piaget, John Watson, Urie Bronfenbrenner, among others. Science, like any other social construction, is value-laden, and so scholarship is constrained by a set of context-specific values that determine how knowledge is perceived. Also questioned by the postmodern perspective is early-years educators' gullibility to apply a given developmental model to educational contexts regardless of their cultural specificities. As such, they would unwittingly rely on a developmental knowledge-base predominantly informed by homogenous child populations (mostly of White middle-class European/North American lineage), with peripheral attention being accorded to populations from underprivileged areas of the southern hemisphere. Balance in this respect is at the core of the educational practice, with educators extracting the best of developmental knowledge (i.e., situating knowledge) and the idiosyncrasy of learning (i.e., multiplying readings of the learning event/people).

How the concept of balance ties in with early-years education hands-on may well be ascribed to the unprecedented changes we are presently going through. Postmodern practices would more than ever before command due attention in a globalised world as our contemporary social life is gradually morphing from similarity into hybridity (Ryan and Grieshaber, 2005). Added to the understanding that children are being raised differentially according to the family and community circumstances constantly varying in

intensity, emerging technologies and their accessibility have widened the margin of influence on children. When they set foot on their new educational environment, preschoolers and even kindergartners bring with them a variety of experiences, thus making the task of educators to standardise the patterns and rate of growth hard to achieve. In view of such challenges, there is ample reason to position the concept of balance onto the foreground of our curricular interests. Commensurate with this argument is Marcon's (2012, p.159) statement that "maintaining an optimal balance across developmental domains that is appropriate for each age group as well as each individual child is the key. In the absence of balance there is a potential to do more harm than good."

Any consistent vision for ECE cannot deliver unless based on an operational definition of the child and child development. In consideration of human ecology, childhood is defined as an ongoing process of growth whose journey towards maturity is not unique. Much like trees, the developmental course of children would proceed in a holistic way; and one overarching universal rule that controls one's pace and trajectory of growth is balance. Throughout such process, there is perennial effort to achieve some form of symmetry now that we are imperfect beings. In the words of Albert Einstein, riding the bicycle of growth is only when we keep up to some balance so as to optimise such process. Viewed as a micro-system, the child would need a balanced macro-system (i.e., the family and beyond) to ensure some stability along a road recurrently marked with criss-crosses. It is in the spirit of compromising that s/he finds a chance for growth, much as illustrated in Vygotsky's zone of proximal development where the optimal moment of learning comes upon the need to balance a missing piece of input here and now.

It is also crucial to note that a vision for a balanced child development stipulates an evaluation control system. Balance would serve as the platform for all forms of assessment, a benchmark against which one can judge the shape and rhythm of child development as any other forms of human experience. That is to say, behavioural anomalies (e.g., criminality, depression, introversion and power abuse), physical disorder (e.g., obesity, heart disease and anaemia), and deficiency levels of literacy and numeracy are unexceptionally manifestations of imbalance. The reverse also applies to positive forms of behaviour (e.g., peace, democracy, toddler's walk and love) as indicators of balance. That even applies to existential issues and concepts related to our *raison d'être* and we take for granted. One example that lends itself to this idea is Thomas Merton's description of wellbeing as not a matter of intensity (i.e., related to excess or achievement) but a state of balance.

By this token, assessment indicators such as success/failure, mastery, excellence, and achievement would be supplanted by rather expedient terminology (i.e., *healthy* development instead of *successful* skill mastery). Furthermore, drawing on balance to capture the idiosyncrasy of child development affirms the idea that we have unique paths, rates and tributaries of development, which makes individuals compare against one another's achievement(s). Overall, in line with this perspective, adopting balance as a value system would enable early-years educationalists, from curriculum designers to fieldworkers, to draw on more commonsense in judging their professional experience in terms of objectives and practices. In the Tunisian context, that would perhaps help relax misconceptions about the poor quality training that young educator graduates have received. When it comes to evaluating the candidacy of these fresh graduates to the job market, it is common practice that their professional disposition is simplistically judged

against an accountability system based on the number of skills, training hours, and the sum of theory accumulated. That would accordingly make good sense when viewing an educator as depository of a skill set rather than a process of growth that requires indefinite accretion of experience to attend maturity.

5 A balanced curriculum

Considering balance as the theoretical substrate for educationalists in their effort to offer a framework that optimises child development (NC Department of Public Instruction, 2003), one may find rationale in the tree metaphor. As it is in the best for a tree to grow round-shaped, it is essential to verify symmetry between and/or within domains of development as well as the balance of goals between the achievement/mastery and personal fulfilment ends (Marcon, 2012). Although the literature abounds in a number of developmental models which in some way interrelate, there is common tendency to encapsulate this pool of representations into three main strands: physical, socio-emotional and cognitive. Accordingly, a balanced comprehensive curriculum should address the developmental triad of doing, feeling, and thinking to cultivate a well-rounded child. It therefore follows, as Morrison (2014) puts it in *Forbes*, that early-years education “should be helping to produce rounded individuals, rather than processing them through exam factories.” In so doing, it would help validate through such areas personal attributes that cannot be measured on a mandated test (e.g., motor skills, self-esteem, empathy, problem-solving, critical responsiveness, etc.).

Physical balance comprises the growth of biological mass entity and the development of motor skills from infancy up to the age of puberty. This area of development perhaps needs due focus than ever before due to the drastic changes in children’s social life. One of today’s child-related issues that one may identify around the world beyond cultural and geographic demarcation lines is overweight, a phenomenon hardly addressed some thirty years ago. In Tunisia, Abdelkafi-Koubaa et al. (2012) reported that obesity reached 9.1% among four and six year-old children and such figure was disproportionately higher in urban and coastal areas. In fact, child obesity is appreciably associated with the lack of physical activity and the sedentary lifestyle as well as the changing diet habits. Children’s use of gadgets, for instance, has recently grown to an unprecedented level to the disregard of the playground (Abdelkafi-Koubaa et al., 2012; Ladjili-Mouchette, 2013). So, instead of hoarding preschoolers, a balanced curriculum’s priority is to set balance between desk time academics and experimental/art-focused activities (e.g., using rhythmical movement to do math, dramatic representation to study language arts, and field trips to study history).

Socio-emotional balance is concerned with the development of children’s interrelated social and emotional types of intelligence and their attendant skills. Through such skills children would be able to both identify their and others’ emotions and behave appropriately towards others in a variety of settings and situations. The hegemony of the hoarding approach in Tunisian (pre)schools is a major source for a more truncated childhood plagued by new behavioural deficiencies. Premature anxiety, by way of illustration, has been frequently reported by child psychiatrists (Masmoudi et al., 2014) where it would not usually come out until the time of adolescence. It is hence no wonder to stand astonished at alarming depression figures reported by Ferrari et al. (2013) in

North Africa. Seeds of such disorder are not lacking in our preschool programs whose one-dimensional pursuit of academic excellence has left no room for investing in children's emotions. Parenthetically, the proposal by the Minister of Education, Neji Jalloul, in 2016 to promote arts education and well-being was ridiculed by the educational community seeing it as an attempt to upset the accountability system.

Nonetheless, as it is a main concern of a balanced curriculum to advance the image of well-rounded children, focus on arts as an essential part of the basic educational programs would expectedly enhance children's well-being through a wiser management of their emotions and a better social *savoir-faire* (NC Department of Public Instruction, 2003). In terms of practice, this seems approachable if educators create an enriched environment for the young learners. On the one hand, preschools should constitute a steady source of positive emotional support. Like food, children need a rich diet of positive emotions which, after they imbibe, would turn into the currency that colours their social exchanges and conflicts. On the other hand, an enriched environment would not only make social interaction as the core of their learning experience, but also represent a source of empowerment that substantiates their agency. Accordingly, a range of social skills would flourish turning them into active participants rather than observers, thus promoting a range of social values such as independence, compassion, team work and constructive competitiveness.

Cognitive balance relates to the most complex domain of child development. Contrary to the mainstream product-focused reliance on numeracy and literacy as the major concentrations of learning (Kirchner, 2011), the balanced approach views learning achievement from a process-oriented angle. It concurs in principle with Zull's (2002) idea of education for the 'whole brain'. This would come about only if we balance out the four pillars of information processing (i.e., gathering, analysing, creating and acting). In view of that, an appropriate curriculum should align resources to feed these four master functions through creating even opportunities to exercise them jointly or otherwise. Another theoretical tributary to the idea of a cognitive balance is the theory of *multiple-intelligences* advanced by Gardner (1983), which has been a constant source of insight for early-years scholarship in terms of teaching and assessment. The categorisation of human cognition into a number of specified intelligences (e.g., visual, linguistic, logical, kinaesthetic, musical and interpersonal) and educators' awareness of such distribution would puzzle out the issue of learning variation among children. As such, excelling at one area of intelligence may cover some deficiency in other area(s), as with an excellent math teacher being unable to socialise with her students probably due to the meagre effort invested in cultivating her interpersonal intelligence during her formative years.

In view of this theoretical grounding, cognitive balance is parsimoniously conceived here as the endeavour to even out three processing modes: memory, creativity and critical thinking/analysability. Rote learning is essential to the acquisition of encyclopaedic knowledge which is in turn indispensable for the functioning and development of the other two modes. In fact, it is not hard to notice some clear one-dimensional interest among educators, at least in Tunisian preschools, in favour of rote learning. My five-year old daughter's preschool portfolio is full of evaluation tests on her thematic knowledge as well as the weekly recital assignments. Such trade-off is far more palpable in the *koutteb* institution whose agenda is fully premised on the memorisation of verses from the Koran. Interestingly though, the adoption of a balanced perspective would reset this pedagogical state of affairs for more substance to creativity and critical thinking/analysability. It is

hence fundamental that pedagogical practices proceed in an enriched environment without undue accountability pressure, yet imbued with enjoyable and approachable challenge. This would consistently strengthen their sense of self-regulation and free-up both their creative and analytical reflexes which can hardly flourish when these young learners are being (un)wittingly hotheaded.

6 The case of foreign language education

As we keep wondering about the reason(s) for introducing foreign languages to preschoolers, there is no cutting-edge effort to give this area some solid grounding. A challenging, yet important, question that is worth-addressing here is whether foreign languages should be subjects for *educating* or *schooling* children. The latter seems to occupy the pedagogical mainstream in terms of attitudes and practices. The dominant discourse is proficiency-oriented towards seeing a foreign language as a system to be mastered. What matters, according to this ‘banking’ view (Freire, 1972), is the stock of vocabulary to store and/or the set of grammatical rules to command. It is a one-dimensional focus on the linguistic competence in a given language regardless of its cultural component. Such discourse, also reverberating across more advanced school levels (Abid, 2012), is fundamentally justified in a culture of excellence and by a socio-economic technicist rationale to imbue future generations with the linguistic skills needed in the job market. Such disproportionate focus may be prejudicial to and deflecting from the very goal of early-years education for a healthy balance between achievement and personal fulfilment.

Congruent with a balanced approach to educating children through the foreign languages platform is the pedagogy of awakening. The ATL approach, originating from the language awareness movement and precisely through the work of Hawkins (1984), seeks to promote children’s awareness about languages, their varieties, and the respective cultural substance rather than their acquisition. ATL has matured into a pedagogical platform that was taken seriously by the Council of Europe through its 2001 adoption of the landmark document The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, with a view to promoting an education for diversity in a growingly multilingual Europe. ATL was empirically informed by a laboratory-oriented scholarship that subscribes to the plurilingual movement that sees currency in cultivating plurality in the new European ethos (see Candelier et al., 2012; Hulstijn, 2014). In this purview, many related research projects have burgeoned (e.g., EDiLiC, JaLing and Eulang), that have so far managed to document substantial theoretical and pedagogical literature.

Any ATL-based intervention creates a linguistically-rich environment for children living in quite culturally homogeneous communities based on activities, such as listening to stories in different languages, retelling them in their own language, playing language games, listening and dancing to songs in other languages, among others. The common rationale of these activities is, as Coelho et al. (2018, p.4) put it, for children to “explore a myriad of new sounds, observe different writing systems, reflect on differences and similarities between languages, compare and contrast languages and their sounds, and recognise their own linguistic repertoire as a valuable asset.” Where educators are essentially purported to *initiate* more than *teach*, children are to *discover* rather than *learn* such languages/varieties.

Introducing ATL to preschool curricula brings to prominence the transformative value vis-à-vis the hegemony of the proficiency-based approach in foreign language education. It would gear language-focused program to new objectives fixed on personality development. One major objective is to cultivate new identities open to other cultures. In her reflection on Amartya Sen's take on identity, Costa-Pinto (2006, p.1) states that "children are boxed into identities without prior exposure to the possibilities, opportunities, and processes of individual reasoning that enable them to choose themselves." The ATL approach would instead provide a variety of opportunities for language exposure, which may imbue children with a sense of agency deemed necessary for them to grow plurilingual selves. In so doing, their ethnocentricity and sense of alterity will be offset by a stronger receptivity to other (sub)cultural differences and reflection on linguistic/cultural variation.

The balance that the ATL approach may bring to ECE language education would also lend itself to the citizenship question. In Costa-Pinto's (2006) child outlook above, the dominant educational discourse presents an aberrant image of passive citizenship through inculcating the values of obedience, dependence, and conformity (Osborne, 1991). Instead, the ATL approach, premised on the tenet of promoting the learner's agency through the values of discovery, questioning and independence, would champion an education for active citizenship. This version of citizenship would feed on a set of life-long skills which children adopt from an early age once consistently exposed to such a linguistically-rich environment through the pedagogy of discovery and inquiry. Hence, the propaedeutic effect of such pedagogical practice would figure in their ability to ask questions, express and grapple with ambiguities, voice emotions towards differences, reflect on values originating from other cultures of their own. Overall, the adoption of an ATL approach will contribute to a balance between two learning ends: the need to learn languages/cultures and the need to learn through languages/cultures.

Recent findings from the Tunisian context attest to the synergy between balance as a frame of reference and the ATL approach. In this purview, the study reported in Ben Maad (2016) suggested that the implementation of ATL may well help children as young as five-to-seven years old cultivate plurilingual selves, imbuing them with observant intercultural responsiveness. In the four-month experimental course, Ben Maad (2016) identified a significant change in the subjects' attitudes and commitment in terms of curiosity about and receptivity to cultural differences towards acquiring a stronger sense of intercultural flexibility. Such attitudinal transformation would come along a parallel development in their affective behaviour, more precisely attendant to the informants' intercultural empathy which is the ability to identify with the feelings and thoughts of people from various cultural origins. Based on post-task interview data, it follows that building on pedagogy of discovery through an ATL platform engaged them emotionally.

The ATL approach also lends itself to the balanced curriculum due its tendency to buttress children's critical thinking ability and thus keeping it proportionate with automaticity. Ben Maad (forthcoming) attests to such cognitive balance through a consequential role for foreign languages in an education for the whole brain (Zull, 2002). Using an experimental mixed-methods framework, Ben Maad (forthcoming) arranged a set of ATL-focused activities to young informants who subsequently responded to an *ad hoc* questionnaire to detect their stereotyping behaviour. On the basis of the undecided responses identified (i.e., median points at the five-Likert distribution), follow-up interview data confirmed significant indecisiveness which intimates their questioning of

some stereotypes being carefully targeted in the experimental course. However, that show of indecision is far from indexing failure in responsiveness to the (inter)cultural information, but rather as evidence for a new habit to 'deconstruct' the sum of stereotypes amassed at that age point.

While stereotyping echoes a reflexive and impressionable processing typically associated with automaticity (Bless et al., 2001), such emerging indecisiveness illustrates some cognitive readiness to think critically using high-order habits like inductive/conductive reasoning and making inferences. More bluntly perhaps, the ATL-based procedure here helped the young subjects individualise their responsiveness to cultural substance by forming hypotheses and comparing assorted (inter)cultural input. Nonetheless, the activation of such analysability apparatus does not impede the brain from rote processing nor is it prejudicial to achievement outcomes when it comes to literacy development and the accumulation of encyclopaedic knowledge about the target language/culture. However, the sum of acquisition does not comply with any form of accountability or educator-pointed mandate as it is all left to the child to individuate learning according to his/her actual needs. As such, the implementation of ATL-focused pedagogy and the unburdening of children would thus allow for a relatively balanced type of learning beyond any form of imposition.

7 Conclusions

Motivated by a strong belief in the inalienable importance of balance in making ECE a real locomotive for social change, this paper represented a space for reflecting on the Tunisian case. It began with an overview of the Tunisian experience in terms of its leading institutions, the related working policies, and its lingering problems. One major problem that transpires from the overview is the lack of a joint vision pertinent to this educational sector. The outcome of this is a hard-charging environment powered by a market-minded 'culture of excellence' generating, among other things, truncated childhood that lacks the very basic skill sets (e.g., creativity, critical thinking, resilience and cooperation) necessary to survive the challenges of the 21st century. In view of the medley of views influencing the sector, the paper accentuates the need to hammer out a standard vision for a well-rounded curriculum anchored in a philosophy of balance. The concept of balance is the common denominator in terms of objectives (e.g., achievement and personal fulfilment), educators' daily practices, and the assessment of child development. To give some practical substance to this conceptual effort, the paper illustrated the approachability of this vision through focus on foreign languages education, specifically the implementation of pedagogy of awakening.

The paper went beyond the analytical task of identifying such problems in view of the effort to suggest how to grapple with them. Working towards a vision for balance can sustain consensus among research circles and the community of practice. Neither does it part with the mainstream developmental knowledge-base, nor overlook the recent trends associated with postmodern thinking in reflection of the complexity and the spirit of the 21st century challenges. Such possible symbiosis, though visibly imbued with a sense of realism, still commands joint curricular effort in terms of program implementation and educator training much like the North Carolina experience (NC Department of Public Instruction, 2003). The latter is perhaps the most testing as change does not simply come

up with new ideas, yet with the long process of instilling these ideas persistently into the collective consciousness of the educationalist community.

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Notes

- 1 'Protection et éducation de la petite enfance: Une priorité en Afrique, en Amérique du Sud et en Asie [Early Childhood Care and Education: A Priority in Africa, South America and Asia]', *Focus* [online] <http://www.ciep.fr/sites/default/files/atoms/files/focus-protection-education-petite-enfance-priorite-afrique-amerique-sud-asie.pdf> (accessed 20 April 2018).
- 2 A survey published by the Ministry of Women, Family, and Childhood in 2014.
- 3 Being a member of the Scientific Council, an advisory body of teachers, in this institution, I noticed on occasions to reform the curriculum a typical tendency of members from any discipline pressing to gain 'territory' in the curriculum.