



## Reimagining Vietnam's early childhood curriculum: Moving toward competency, equity, and cultural relevance

Ngoc Minh Ngoc Minh\*

email: [minhvt@vnies.edu.vn](mailto:minhvt@vnies.edu.vn)

The Vietnam National Institute of Education Sciences (VNIES), Vietnam

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\*Corresponding author

### Abstract

This paper analyzes the current Early Childhood Education (ECE) curriculum in Vietnam and the key innovations proposed in the Ministry of Education and Training's (MOET) new draft curriculum. A systematic review of 42 academic papers identifies major limitations in the existing curriculum, including rigid content, outdated pedagogies, and limited alignment with 21st-century learning needs. In contrast, the draft curriculum introduces a modern, competency-based and rights-based approach that prioritizes holistic development, social-emotional learning, and respect for diversity. Its reforms center on three orientations: (1) curriculum modernization through socio-emotional competencies, child agency, and flexible pedagogical approaches; (2) strengthened teacher and institutional autonomy, including improved working conditions and increased decision-making power; and (3) equity and inclusion through rights-based practices and robust family-community engagement. These developments demonstrate Vietnam's commitment to global ECE standards and advance international discussions on competency- and rights-based early childhood curriculum reform.

**Keywords:** early childhood education; curriculum, competency, equity, cultural relevance

## INTRODUCTION

Curriculum is widely recognized not only as a collection of learning content but as a structured framework encompassing learning experiences, cultural contexts, and social interactions that contribute to holistic development (Bintz & Dillard, 2007; Tanner & Tanner, 2007; Ornstein & Hunkins, 2017). In early childhood education (ECE), curriculum is understood as a set of planned experiences that shape children's learning (Coşkun Yaşar & Aslan, 2021). According to Tyler & Hlebowitsh (1949), curriculum development must address four essential questions: What goals should be achieved? What learning activities help achieve them? How should activities be organized? How can outcomes be assessed?

Early childhood education (ECE) is a cornerstone of national education systems and plays a central role in achieving Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4.2, which ensures that all children have access to quality early childhood care, development, and education (OECD, 2021; UNESCO, 2011). In Vietnam, despite a long educational tradition, ECE only began to

receive systematic attention after 1945. For decades, it was shaped by Confucian traditions and Soviet pedagogy, often described as top-down, theory-driven, and ideologically influenced (Phan, 2012). This produced a teacher-centered model in which children became passive recipients of knowledge, with limited voice and agency in their learning process (McLeod & Nguyen, 2001; Phan, 2012).

Vietnam's formal recognition of ECE as a distinct level of education was established in the Education Law (Law on Education No. 43/2019/QH14, 2019). The introduction of the national Early Childhood Curriculum (CEC) in 2009 marked a shift toward a child-centered philosophy (Le Thu Huong, 2009; Ministry of Education and Training - Department of Preschool Education, 2017). While the curriculum made important contributions, after 15 years of implementation it has revealed key shortcomings, including a rigid structure, outdated pedagogy, and insufficient responsiveness to children's future needs (Ministry of Education and Training - Department of Preschool Education, 2021, 2022). This raises a critical question: What directions should Vietnam's early childhood curriculum pursue in the next reform?

In the context of global transformation, ECE must move beyond basic care and school readiness to emphasize the development of 21st-century competencies—critical thinking, creativity, emotional regulation, communication, collaboration, and adaptability—skills essential for lifelong learning (Nesbitt, 2021; Casel, 2021). Meeting these demands requires a fundamental curriculum reform that aligns with both national identity and international trends.

To address this challenge, MOET is drafting a new ECE curriculum grounded in competency- and rights-based approaches. The proposed curriculum seeks to develop the core values and competencies of Vietnamese citizens while respecting children's rights and diversity (MOET, 2024). This article examines the innovations proposed in the draft curriculum, drawing on international experiences such as New Zealand's *Te Whāriki* (Carr & May, 2000), Finland's ECEC Framework (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2016), and Singapore's Holistic Competence Model (Wu & Tan, 2021), with the aim of informing policy directions for Vietnam's curriculum reform toward achieving SDG 4.2 and ensuring quality and equitable ECE for all children.

Specifically, the study aims to (1) analyze the limitations of Vietnam's current ECE curriculum, and (2) assess the proposed draft in light of global trends to evaluate its potential for advancing competencies, equity, and cultural relevance.

## METHOD

### Research Design

The study employed a systematic literature review, conducted within a research framework closely aligned with the stated objectives. This method was chosen to ensure comprehensiveness, objectivity, and transparency in synthesizing existing studies. Such an approach enables a consistent analysis of the limitations of the current curriculum and an evaluation of the proposed reforms in relation to global trends.

### Data Collection

Sources were primarily retrieved through Google Scholar using both Vietnamese and English keywords, including “Chương trình Giáo dục” (“Education Curriculum”), “Chương trình Giáo dục Mầm non (ECE)” (“Early Childhood Education Curriculum”), “Các phương pháp phát triển chương trình” (“Curriculum Development Methods”), and “Đánh giá trong Giáo dục Mầm non (ECE)” (“Assessment in Early Childhood Education”). The search was limited to publications from 2009 onwards.

### Selection Process

A total of 128 records were initially identified. After screening titles and abstracts, 64 records were retained for full-text review. Of these, 42 met the final inclusion criteria, comprising 35 academic articles and 7 current Vietnamese policy documents. The selection process is illustrated in the PRISMA flow diagram.

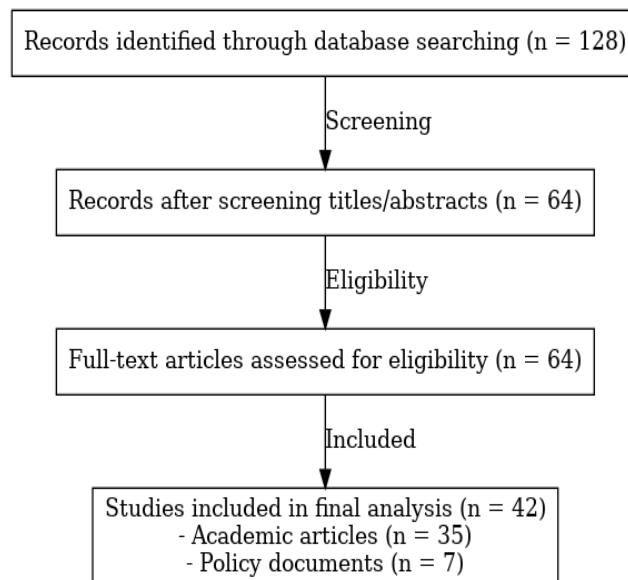


Figure 1. PRISMA Flow Diagram of the Study Selection Process

In this study, both academic articles and policy documents were combined to ensure a comprehensive perspective: academic studies provided theoretical foundations and insights into international trends, while policy documents reflected the legal framework and practical context in Vietnam. The two types of sources were analyzed simultaneously within the same coding process but were categorized into separate groups for comparison and cross-referencing. This approach enabled the integration of theoretical analysis with policy-oriented analysis, thereby generating findings of both scholarly and practical significance.

### **Data analysis**

The selected materials were analyzed using open coding to identify initial themes and concepts, followed by axial coding to group and connect categories into broader patterns. The coding was carried out by three members of the research team rather than a single individual to enhance objectivity. Initial codes were compared, discussed, and agreed upon. Inter-coder reliability was established through a consensus rate of over 85%, indicating high consistency in the classification and organization of data.

## **RESULTS**

### **Trends in developing preschool education curriculums in some countries around the world**

In the context of globalization and digital transformation, early childhood education curricula worldwide have undergone notable innovations to address the holistic developmental needs of children in the 21st century. These emerging trends highlight new perspectives on children's rights, the role of early education, and systemic strategies for improving quality and equity.

Many countries have been shifting from the traditional educational model to a "child-centered" approach, emphasizing the active and proactive role of children in the learning process. Children are considered the subjects of the educational process, with the right to be listened to, to participate and choose, to explore and construct meaning from the world around them (Carr & May, 2000). This is consistent with the philosophy of respecting individual development (Thuận & Giang, 2023) and valuing social-emotional education (Le & Vu, 2024). This approach originates from the child development theory of Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky, in which children are seen as active learners, capable of constructing knowledge through experience and social interaction. With this approach, teachers give children the freedom to choose activities from the proposed educational curriculum, according to their needs, interests

and potential (Catalano et al., 2023). Children are encouraged to actively participate, explore, and construct knowledge through interaction with the environment. This contributes to high-quality early childhood education that provides a powerful tool to address educational inequalities and increase educational outcomes (Greaves & Bahous, 2021). The New Zealand early childhood education curriculum (Te Whāriki) is a typical example, emphasizing the role of children in choosing, exploring and constructing meaning from the world around them (Carr & May, 2000; Lee et al., 2013).

This is one of the prominent trends in reforming preschool education curriculums today. Instead of focusing only on imparting knowledge, preschool education curriculums based on competency approaches focus on forming core competencies for children, with the goal of helping children develop comprehensively and have the ability to adapt flexibly in modern society in a context where change is taking place rapidly. Competency-based curriculums not only focus on knowledge but also develop basic competencies such as thinking, creativity, cooperation, communication, and adaptation. The curriculum does not stop at imparting knowledge but also aims to develop core competencies for children, such as critical thinking, creativity, cooperation, etc. Both Finnish and Singaporean curriculums strongly implement this trend (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2016; Wu & Tan, 2021). In Finland, the early childhood education curriculum clearly identifies transversal competencies that are integrated throughout learning activities (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2016). In the Asian region, Singapore has also seen a clear shift from content-based goals to competency development through a “holistic development” model (Wu & Tan, 2021).

Some studies on competency-based approaches in preschool education in Vietnam continue to emphasize the need for appropriate educational methods to develop children's specific competencies in the new context (Hà, 2022; Vu & Nguyen, 2024). In addition, the issue of connectivity between the preschool education curriculum and the 2018 general education curriculum of Vietnam (Vu & Nguyen, 2024) aims at synchronization between the two levels of education; research on preschool children's competencies (Vu & Nguyen, 2024), and evaluation of Vietnam's preschool education curriculum in the new period (Chu et al., 2023) show the need for innovation in approaches to building preschool education curriculums and a system of curriculum evaluation criteria to ensure quality in the current context.

This approach is based on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), emphasizing children's rights to participate, to be heard, and to be protected. In Nordic countries such as Sweden and Norway, children's rights have been deeply integrated into the preschool education curriculum (Karlsson, 2012).

The trend affirms that children are citizens with rights. In curriculum development, rights such as the right to learn, the right to express opinions, the right to respect differences, the right to be protected, etc., are integrated into the educational philosophy and methods of organizing activities. This also contributes to promoting inclusive education and gender equality in preschool education.

Driven by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, many countries are integrating children's rights into preschool education curriculums as a core principle. The Finnish Early Childhood Education Curriculum (Eero S., 2022) shows that aspects of Children's Rights (Equity, Equality) are reflected in the Curriculum's perspective - "Equity, equality and diversity in childcare and education are important to promote the democratic values of Finnish society". The Thai Early Childhood Education Curriculum (Ministry of Education Thailand, 2017). Children's Rights appear in three thematic areas in the Curriculum. Meanwhile, the Early Childhood Education Curricula of Australia, Chile, Cuba, and Indonesia show that children's rights are integrated into the educational standards of the curriculum (Lee J. et al., 2015). Norway and Sweden have developed curricula that reflect children's rights to participation, freedom of expression, and protection. According to Karlsson's (2012) research, integrating these rights into educational practices helps increase children's confidence and initiative from the earliest years of life.

An integrated approach that emphasizes the application of technology and digital transformation in early childhood education. Integrating technology into the curriculum is focused on preparing children to get acquainted with the digital world in a suitable and safe way. At the same time, technology also supports teachers in designing flexible and personalized teaching activities according to children's abilities.

Digital transformation in preschool education does not stop using digital devices but also aims to change the way of teaching and learning to suit the new era. Korea and Estonia are two leading countries in integrating digital technology into preschool classrooms through digital learning platforms, electronic assessment systems, and software to support language development for young children. According to OECD (2017), the application of technology in preschool education needs to ensure a balance between digital and real-life experiences so as not to affect comprehensive development.

Some countries, such as Korea, Estonia, and Australia, integrate information technology into preschool education activities to enhance learning experiences and develop digital skills

for children. However, the application needs to be designed in accordance with the characteristics of preschool development (OECD, 2017).

Respect for cultural diversity and local identity. Educational curriculums need to reflect local cultural identity and ensure cultural diversity. New Zealand has integrated Māori elements into the Te Whāriki curriculum, while Singapore has implemented a “glocalisation” model to both preserve traditional values and absorb modern elements (Layne, 2022).

Many countries apply the “glocalisation” method – globalization but adjusted to the local context to ensure quality according to international standards, while preserving national cultural values in preschool education curriculums.

Modern preschool education curriculums not only focus on global knowledge but also preserve and promote national cultural values. New Zealand's Te Whāriki curriculum deeply integrates Māori cultural elements, helping indigenous children develop in a space rich in identity. In Singapore, the concept of “glocalisation” is widely applied, in which global values such as creativity and critical thinking are implemented in parallel with traditional cultural education and Eastern ethics (Layne, 2022).

### **The current preschool education curriculum in Vietnam**

The current preschool education curriculum in Vietnam was issued by the Minister of Education and Training in 2009 and was revised and supplemented twice in 2016 and 2020. This curriculum is compiled in accordance with the national framework curriculum, suitable for each age group of nursery and kindergarten (Le Thu Huong, 2009). The curriculum represents a strong innovation in preschool education, and the implementation of the curriculum has brought about positive changes for preschool education in Vietnam. The report of the Ministry of Education and Training shows some advantages of the current Preschool Education Curriculum (Ministry of Education and Training - Department of Preschool Education, 2017, 2021, 2022). The following paragraph explains the points of the report including curriculum viewpoint and content in the curriculum document,

Framework curriculum, open in nature; meeting the diversity of regions and young people, aiming at comprehensive development; ensuring close connection between nursery and kindergarten ages, linking with the General Education Curriculum; comprehensive, integrated, child-centered educational perspective with the educational motto "playing while learning, learning through playing"; empowering localities, preschool education facilities, teachers to proactively select, supplement some educational content and implement

educational plans suitable for preschool children and local conditions, and preschool education facilities.

The objectives of the Preschool Education Curriculum demonstrate comprehensiveness and scientific; content Nurturing, caring for, educating and protecting children scientifically, developing in harmony, suitable to the abilities of children at each age; The expected results in the Curriculum demonstrate the inheritance and development between nursery and kindergarten ages.

**Table 1.** Comparison of global curriculum trends and the current situation in Vietnam

Global Trend	Key Features	Vietnam's Current Situation	Gaps/Challenges
Child-centered approach	Children are active, have a voice, and learn through experience	The 2009 curriculum affirms the philosophy, but implementation remains limited	Greater efforts are needed to strengthen children's genuine participation
Competency-based approach	Development of core 21st-century competencies	The curriculum remains content-oriented, with limited emphasis on competencies. Although it is a national framework, many contents are regulated in excessive detail. In the new context:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Alignment with the 2018 General Education Curriculum and the 4.0 era is required</li> <li>- The curriculum needs to incorporate contemporary issues, global trends, and international integration to prepare children to actively adapt to the 21st century world.</li> </ul>
Rights-based approach	Equity, inclusion, and respect for diversity	Not yet fully integrated into policy documents	Children's rights are stipulated in the Law on Children (2016), but aspects of international integration, multiculturalism, gender equality, and preservation of Vietnamese cultural values are not clearly reflected in the curriculum. → Stronger integration of children's rights and gender equality is needed
Technology integration	Digital learning, digital skills, personalized support	Lack of content on digital transformation for young children	Digital skills appropriate to children's developmental stages need to be incorporated
Cultural diversity and identity	Combining global values with local identity	Emphasis placed on traditional values	A modern form of "glocalisation" needs to be further developed



## The Vietnam's Early Childhood Curriculum: Moving Toward Competency, Equity, and Cultural Relevance

With the context of Preschool Education in the 21st century, the Preschool Education Curriculum of Vietnam in the new period has been developed by the Ministry of Education and Training of Vietnam with the main goal of creating fundamental and comprehensive changes in the quality and effectiveness of Preschool Education by 2030 with a vision to 2045; comprehensively developing preschool children, preparing children to be ready for first grade and human learning capacity, laying the foundation for the formation and development of core values of Vietnamese people. The curriculum aims at some basic new points as follows:

Approaching capacity based on social-emotional factors, laying the foundation for the formation and development of core values of Vietnamese people: expressed through goals, expected results, content, methods, forms of organizing educational activities, and assessing children's development.

The competency-based curriculum is built on the foundation of educational theory based on learners' competencies. This is an approach based on learners' outputs, closely combining teaching methods and assessment forms designed to evaluate learners' learning through their demonstration of knowledge, attitudes, values, skills, and behaviors towards the requirements or expected results at each level (J. Gervais, 2016). The curriculum emphasizes what learners can do with the knowledge and skills they have learned. Teaching activities are designed to create opportunities for learners to apply subject knowledge and skills to life situations. The curriculum focuses on developing learners' understanding and absorption abilities rather than imparting knowledge content. According to this approach, children are considered the subjects of the learning process, proactive, positive, full of potential, and need to be nurtured and promoted (Nesbitt, 2021).

According to the current trend of preschool education, the curriculum is oriented towards global values, 21st-century skills, or social-emotional competencies, combined with traditional national social values. The new preschool education curriculum of Vietnam orients the education of children according to the core values of Vietnamese people, ensuring that they are social values of global citizens in the context of integration, and are selected appropriately for preschool children. The curriculum is based on social-emotional connections between individuals in the educational environment to influence children, helping them feel loved, confident, and actively participate in activities to develop and perfect their personality.

Rights-based approach, ensuring quality, equity, inclusion, equality, and respect for children's differences; educating children with special needs, developing language (paying

attention to children's mother tongue) in building and developing preschool education curriculums.

The new preschool education curriculum is designed based on the child rights approach - an approach that has received attention from many countries around the world in recent years (Lee J. et al., 2015). This approach is stated in the "Educational Perspective" section of the Curriculum, demonstrating the educational philosophy that puts children at the center; recognizing that the entire educational process must originate from children, for children; ensuring that all children, including children with special needs, have the opportunity to learn and develop in a friendly environment that encourages confidence and independence (Eero S., 2022). Educating children with special needs is not only about providing individual support but also creating conditions for children to actively participate in common activities, thereby promoting natural and effective integration (Othman et al., 2022). In addition, the curriculum emphasizes the importance of language development, especially the mother tongue, to help children build a solid communication foundation, express themselves clearly and confidently. Encouraging the use of the mother tongue not only helps children gain a deeper understanding of culture and personal identity but also is a premise for effective acquisition of other languages.

Empowering educational institutions and teachers in developing educational curriculums since ensuring flexibility, suitability with the developmental characteristics of children, physical conditions, living environment, and local cultural identity, enhancing the rights and autonomy in developing educational curriculums of educational institutions. Preschool education institutions and teachers are proactive in choosing the content, methods, and forms of organizing nurturing, caring, and educational activities to meet the goals and requirements of the school's educational curriculum.

The EDMN curriculum empowers preschool education institutions and teachers in developing curriculums which are to enhance proactiveness, autonomy, and creativity in the process of nurturing, caring for, and educating children by their functions and tasks (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), 2013). Each school and locality develops educational curriculums suitable for practical conditions and the needs of children. They have more "space" to choose and develop content, methods, forms of education, and observe and evaluate children's development according to their diverse learning abilities (Leung et al., 2019). For teachers, the curriculum creates opportunities for them to improve their capacity, developed from the support and encouragement of the school, to be able to proactively adjust

the educational plan according to children's ideas, thereby increasing responsibility and creating motivation for teachers to perform well in their tasks.

Regulations on organizing the children's daily activities in the Curriculum must be consistent with the development of preschool children and the working regime of the team, according to the provisions of the Labor Code. According to Clause 2, Article 105 of the Labor Code 2019, normal working hours must not exceed 08 hours in 01 day and not exceed 48 hours in 01 week. However, the time for children's daily activities according to the daily activities in the current Preschool Education Curriculum (Ministry of Education and Training - Department of Preschool Education, 2021) exceeds 8 hours. To overcome this shortcoming, the new Preschool Education Curriculum is structured in a way that specifies the main activities of the day and the duration needed to ensure activities that are suitable for the characteristics of age development. The Curriculum does not have strict regulations on the time and duration of each activity. This concretization will empower localities and preschool education facilities to decide to the practical situation in each place.

### **Contents inherited and developed from the current preschool education curriculum**

Children are the center of the educational process, the subject in activities and communication. Children learn through play and experience, following the main activities of each age group. Educators are the ones who support children to develop in a safe, friendly, emotional, and meaningful environment.

Child-centered preschool education emphasizes the building of an environment where all children are seen as active subjects in the cognitive process. All children are encouraged and "invited" to explore and learn. Teachers play the role of support, encouragement, sharing, and companionship rather than leading and "steering" the children's learning process. Teachers create opportunities for children to learn through their own experiences, allowing children to proactively propose and initiate learning activities according to their interests; demonstrate a more active role in creating a gentle, warm, and supportive relationship rather than a directive one. In the new Early Childhood Education Curriculum, the issue of personalization in educational activities is of great concern, according to which each child, in addition to the general characteristics of their age, has their own pace of development, interests, and abilities, and teachers need to pay attention to these individual points. Teachers always respect children, accept the differences in culture, religion, views, and customs of each family and community.

Supplementing advanced educational content and methods, suitable for practical conditions. Personalizing the educational process, paying attention to the development of

children's health, physical fitness, emotional and social skills, and being in harmony with nature. The new curriculum enhances teachers' autonomy in selecting methods and organizing learning activities tailored to each child's strengths and needs, reinforcing a child-centered approach that fosters confidence and creativity. Children are encouraged to engage actively through group work, experience sharing, and expressing opinions. Education in harmony with nature is also emphasized, using real-life contexts to nurture respect for the environment and apply knowledge to practical situations.

Expanding opportunities for participation and responsibility of families and communities in implementing preschool education curriculums. The new preschool education curriculum emphasizes respectful and cooperative partnership among families, communities, and schools for children's development (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), 2013). Families are encouraged to collaborate closely with schools in building supportive learning environments both at home and in educational settings. Communities contribute by facilitating social engagement, providing educational resources, and participating in assessment and feedback to promote equity and child rights (Paula & Valaine-Rohnana, 2021). A shared vision between families and schools strengthens consistency in expectations, fostering a unified learning community (UNESCO, 2011; Casel, 2021).

## **DISCUSSION**

The findings indicate that Vietnam's draft Early Childhood Education (ECE) curriculum is being developed along competency-based and child-centered approaches, in line with international trends that emphasize socio-emotional development and core values (Nesbitt, 2021; Casel, 2021). At the same time, the rights-based orientation reflects Vietnam's commitment to implementing the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). However, while competency- and rights-based models have demonstrated effectiveness in countries such as New Zealand (Carr & May, 2000) and Finland (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2016), transferring them into Vietnam's centralized and administratively regulated education system requires careful contextual adaptation.

Key challenges for implementation include teacher capacity, mechanisms for training and professional development, and regional disparities: urban schools are often better positioned to access resources and innovations, whereas rural and remote areas face significant

limitations. Without substantial investments in infrastructure, learning materials, and coherent policy support, the reform risks exacerbating inequalities rather than promoting equity.

Future research should consider piloting the new curriculum across diverse regions to assess its effectiveness and equity. This approach would not only help Vietnam refine the reform based on empirical evidence but also contribute to global debates on how to balance national identity with the development of globally relevant competencies in early childhood education (Wu & Tan, 2021).

## CONCLUSION

There is growing international consensus that high-quality early childhood education (ECE) is a crucial instrument for reducing educational inequality and improving learning outcomes, given the decisive role of the early years in child development. This study has clarified the key directions for reforming Vietnam's ECE curriculum and its alignment with global trends. The draft curriculum demonstrates a significant shift toward a competency-based, child-centered, and rights-based approach, while granting greater autonomy to teachers and educational institutions. These directions build on the achievements of the 2009 Curriculum and selectively incorporate international experiences, aiming to establish an equitable, inclusive, and contextually relevant ECE system for the twenty-first century.

However, challenges related to teacher training, resource allocation, and regional disparities may hinder effective implementation. Future research should prioritize pilot studies across diverse regions and contexts to assess the program's effectiveness and equity. A limitation of this study is its reliance primarily on secondary document analysis, without in-depth examination of feedback from ECE institutions, as the new curriculum is still in the preparatory phase of being piloted in 20 provinces across Vietnam. Therefore, the simultaneous development of policy frameworks, teacher training plans, and support systems is essential to ensure successful implementation. Vietnam's reform experience contributes not only at the national level but also to broader global debates on how to reconcile national identity with the development of core competencies in early childhood education.

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