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Original Research Article

Building Desired Outcomes in Early Childhood Education Programs through a Competency-Based Approach: Global Experience and Lessons for Viet Nam

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Abstract: Desired outcomes in early childhood education programs represent the expectations educators have regarding what most children should know and be able to achieve by the end of preschool. These outcomes are specified through measurable and assessable indicators, reflecting educators' aspirations for holistic child development. Expressed as developmental milestones, these desired outcomes outline general expectations for knowledge and skills children should acquire by the end of each age stage. Core qualities and foundational competencies essential and appropriate for their age are articulated in these outcomes, encompassing domains such as physical, socio-emotional, language, math, science and technology, and arts. This study examines the experiences of Singapore, South Korea, the United States, and New Zealand to derive lessons for building desired outcomes in early childhood education in Viet Nam through a competency-based approach.
Keywords: Desired Outcomes, Early Childhood Education Programs, Competency-Based Approach, Viet Nam.

I. INTRODUCTION

Building desired outcomes in early childhood education through a competency-based approach goes beyond theoretical objectives by focusing on the development of practical skills and competencies in children. These outcomes are designed to help children effectively apply knowledge and skills in daily situations, from communication and teamwork to logical thinking and problem-solving. The objective is to lay a solid foundation that enables children to enter grade one with confidence, fostering essential qualities such as independence, creativity, and adaptability in educational and real-life settings. Competency-based early childhood education programs have been implemented in various countries worldwide. This approach emphasizes not only achieving theoretical academic objectives but also developing essential skills and competencies. Children are encouraged to apply their learned knowledge to real-life situations, helping them become confident, creative, and adaptive in their surroundings. This method aims to build a strong foundation for children's holistic development, encompassing intellectual, physical, emotional, and social aspects. Constructing these outcomes requires focusing on elements like problem-solving skills, critical thinking, and confidence in communication, creating an important foundation that supports the comprehensive, sustainable development of children in their early years.

II. LITERATURE RIVIEW

Desired outcomes in early childhood education are specific objectives that guide the curriculum toward supporting the comprehensive development of young children. These goals extend beyond physical health and motor skills to include cognitive development fostered through exploration and learning activities. Weiss (1997) describes desired outcomes as the projected impacts of a program or project, encompassing both direct changes and extensive long-term effects. Patton (2002) defines these outcomes as anticipated changes in the target audience based on the program's objectives, stressing that evaluating these results is essential for assessing the intervention's effectiveness. According to Chen (2005), desired outcomes should be clear, measurable outputs aligned with the program's overarching goals, developed on a theoretical framework.

Desired outcomes in early childhood education through a competency-based approach focus not only on theoretical goals but also on developing practical skills and competencies in children, enabling them to apply their learning in real-life contexts. According to Bloom's

taxonomy (2001), learning is an active process rather than a passive one. Program designers may use Bloom's taxonomy to set objectives, define learning outcomes, and develop assessment activities. Bloom categorizes educational outcomes into cognitive, psychomotor, and affective domains, emphasizing that education should foster understanding, skills, and attitudes. Spady, the advocate of Outcome-Based Education (OBE), views desired outcomes as the necessary skills and competencies students must acquire to succeed post-graduation, guiding curriculum design based on these specific outcomes.

In early childhood education (ECE), theories and practices surrounding curriculum remain complex topics in research and international debates. This discussion, initially centered on differing ideologies and theories, now also reflects significant influences from national and supranational policy discourses, raising critical questions about curriculum content, coherence, and control. The curriculum in ECE has not fully evolved, partly due to the strong influence of Developmental Psychology and Education, as well as traditional understandings of child development theories. While traditional methods emphasize experiential learning and play with limited focus on subject-specific knowledge, ECE curriculum content remains contentious regarding the extent to which young children can and should access knowledge and skills.

III. RESEARCH RESULTS

3.1. Experience in Building Desired Outcomes in Early Childhood Education Programs in Several Countries

Singapore Early Childhood Education (ECE) in Singapore includes childcare centers and kindergartens, the two primary providers of ECE services for children under 7 years old. Both types offer a formal 3-year preschool education program for children aged 4-6, divided into Nursery (N) for 4-year-olds, Kindergarten 1 (K1) for 5-year-olds, and Kindergarten 2 (K2) for 6-year-olds. Kindergartens usually provide programs of 3 to 4 hours, while childcare centers offer half-day, full-day, and flexible programs to accommodate the diverse needs of working parents.

Curriculum Approach:

Singapore's ECE curriculum framework, called Nurturing Early Learners (NEL), is a national-level framework based on emotional and social development for young children (prioritizing values, social, and emotional skills). This approach prepares children to adapt to the world, grounded in the belief that this is an appropriate approach for today's world. The Singapore government emphasizes that "preschool education in Singapore is not merely preparation for primary education but, more importantly, a critical stage in the holistic development of young children, laying a foundation for lifelong learning." The NEL framework, first published in 2003 and updated in 2022 by Singapore's Ministry of Education (MOE), clearly outlines the ministry's beliefs and principles regarding how children learn and develop and the elements that constitute quality preschool education. The NEL framework provides a comprehensive view of:

Overview of Singapore Educational Outcomes – the ultimate goals of education for Singaporean citizens.

Key Stage Outcomes of Preschool Education:

Figure 2: Overview of Singapore Educational Outcomes
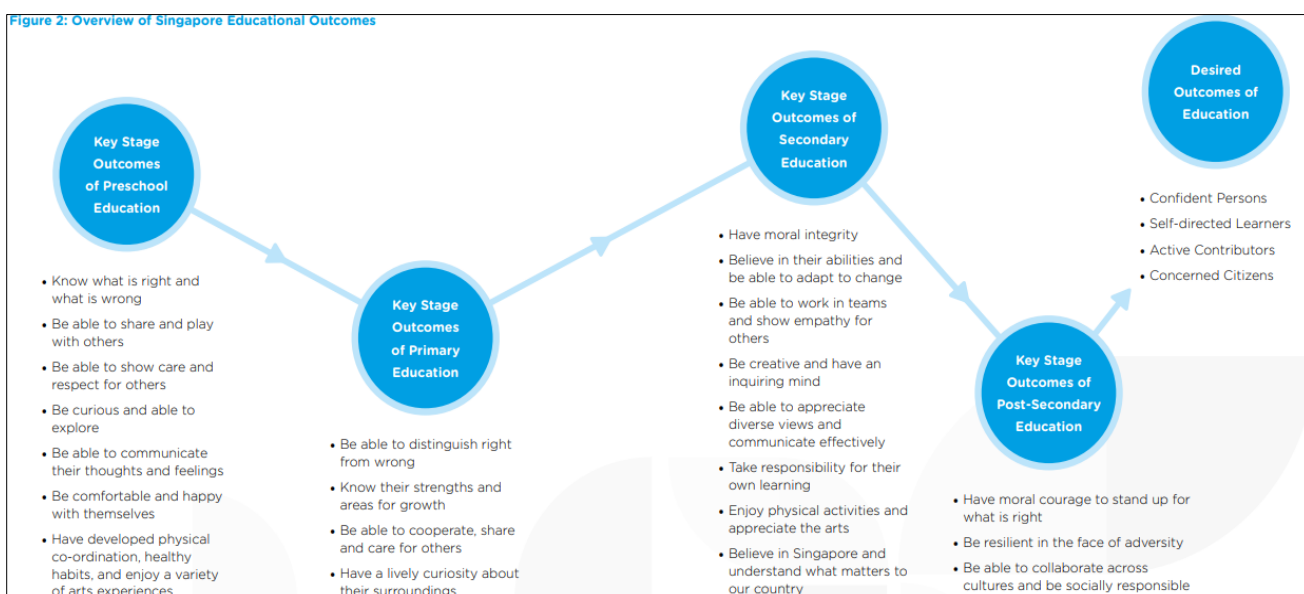
South Korea:

South Korea's national kindergarten education program was initially developed in 1969 and has undergone several revisions. The current national program is the Nuri Curriculum. Before the Nuri

Curriculum, ECE in South Korea lacked consistency between public and private institutions. To address this, the government introduced the Nuri Curriculum in 2012, providing a standardized education program for children aged 3 to 5. This program also emphasizes equal access

to education regardless of family economic background. In 2019, the Nuri Curriculum was revised to keep pace with modern social developments, ensuring that all children can access high-quality education, whether in public or private schools. This reform also addresses the growing demand for developing children's social, emotional, and creative skills.

Key Principles of the Nuri Curriculum:
+Holistic Development:
The curriculum aims at the holistic development of children, including physical, emotional, social, and cognitive aspects. It emphasizes not only knowledge acquisition but also the development of thinking, emotional, and creative skills.

+Educational Equality:
The curriculum is designed to ensure that all children in South Korea, regardless of economic background, have access to quality preschool education. Financial support is provided for low-income families, allowing children to attend the program for free.

+Respect for Individual Development:
The Nuri Curriculum stresses that education should align with each child's developmental stage. Teachers are encouraged to observe and adjust the curriculum to meet individual children's needs.

+Emphasis on Social Skills Development:
The curriculum promotes social interaction, helping children learn teamwork, sharing, and understanding cultural diversity.

+Learning through Play:
One of the core principles of the curriculum is learning through play. Play activities are regarded as the primary means for children to explore the world, develop thinking skills, and communicate.

+Family and Community as Key Partners in Childcare and Education:
Parental and community involvement is encouraged to create a comprehensive learning environment that supports children's development both at school and at home.

Respect for Teacher Autonomy: *Curriculum Approach of the Nuri Curriculum:*

+Child-Centered Approach:
Children are the central focus of the educational process. The curriculum content is flexible, adaptable to each child's development, and shifts the educational model from teacher-centered to child-centered.

+Holistic Development Approach: The program focuses on balanced development across all areas of child growth.

+Multicultural and Intercultural Approach:
The Nuri Curriculum incorporates diverse cultural elements to help children understand and respect differences in society, fostering social skills and the ability to integrate.

New Zealand:
New Zealand's early childhood education program, *Te Whāriki,* asserts that "Te Whāriki provides a curriculum framework for early childhood education, envisioning that all children will grow to be capable, confident learners, good communicators, and physically, mentally, and spiritually healthy, feeling secure in belonging and understanding that they contribute valuable to society." This program not only emphasizes knowledge and skill acquisition but also encourages the holistic development of children within their family and community contexts. *Te Whāriki,* as a framework program, is built on the following core perspectives:

Holistic Development:
Te Whāriki highlights that child development is a holistic process, encompassing physical, cognitive, emotional, social, and spiritual growth. All aspects of a child's life and experiences are interconnected, influencing this developmental process.

Cultural Diversity:
A unique feature of *Te Whāriki* is its respect for and support of diverse cultural values, especially acknowledging and respecting Māori culture, the indigenous culture of New Zealand. *Te Whāriki* also encourages educators to create an environment where the cultural values of children and their families are respected and integrated into the curriculum.

Relationships and Connectedness:
The program stresses the importance of relationships, not only among children and their peers and teachers but also between children, families, and the community. *Te Whāriki* promotes building positive, supportive relationships as a core factor in helping children develop confidence and responsibility.

Learning through Play:
Te Whāriki posits that young children learn through play and exploration. They learn from their surroundings, relationships, and real-life experiences, guided and supported by teachers.

Empowerment and Independence:
Te Whāriki values empowering children, encouraging them to develop self-management and decision-making abilities. This helps them become more confident in handling situations and learn responsibility for their actions.

Te Whāriki is designed with a child-centered, relationship-based approach, focusing on fostering children's comprehensive development.

Child-Centered Approach:

Te Whāriki views children as active learners, and the curriculum revolves around their needs, interests, and potential. Every child has a unique way of learning, and the program encourages exploration and experience. Teachers do not impose but support and guide children's learning, helping them develop self-management and independence skills.

Relationship-Based Approach:

Relationships among children, teachers, families, and the community are seen as pivotal. Interactions and connections within the early education environment play a key role in fostering child development. *Te Whāriki* encourages family-school collaboration to create a warm, supportive learning environment.

Culturally Responsive Approach:

The program respects and supports cultural values, particularly Māori and other ethnic groups. *Te Whāriki* is based on the values of the two primary cultures, Māori and Western, helping children appreciate cultural heritage in learning and life while encouraging teachers to integrate cultural elements into daily instruction.

Learning through Play:

Play is a crucial learning method in *Te Whāriki*. Through play, children learn to explore the world, build relationships, and develop skills, encouraging creative thinking, problem-solving skills, and critical thinking.

Integrated and Flexible Approach:

Te Whāriki is not a rigid program but is flexible and adaptable to the specific context of each school, community, and group of children. The program allows teachers to customize educational activities based on children's needs and interests, as well as the cultural and social factors of each area.

United States:

Early childhood education programs in the U.S. can be full-day or half-day: 16 states and the District of Columbia require school districts to provide full-day kindergarten, while 44 states and the District of Columbia require at least half-day kindergarten. These programs, or educational frameworks, are based on early learning and development standards, constructed with varying contexts and purposes, resulting in diverse content and structure. A prominent example is the *Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework: Birth to Five*, issued by the Department of Health and Human Services, designed to improve early education quality, especially for children from low-income families. This is part of the *Head Start* program, a national initiative launched in 1965 to provide children with opportunities for comprehensive learning and development to support their later success.

The *Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework* was updated in 2015 with the following core approaches:

Child Focused:

The framework centers on five main developmental areas for children from birth to age 5: language and literacy development, cognitive development, social and emotional development, physical health, and creative thinking. These areas are divided into clear goals to help teachers and caregivers easily monitor and assess children's progress.

Evidence-Based:

The framework's design is grounded in scientific research and educational practice, particularly studies on child development. Experts in child development contributed to identifying developmental milestones and essential skills for school readiness.

Continuity and Development:

The framework supports continuous development from birth to age 5, with goals set for different developmental stages: infancy, preschool, and kindergarten, creating a cohesive approach to comprehensive child development.

Community and Family:

The program encourages family and community involvement in children's learning processes. Parental involvement in children's learning and development is seen as essential for the program's success.

Flexibility and Adaptability:

The framework provides general objectives and guidance but is designed to be highly flexible, allowing local schools and *Head Start* programs to adjust to the specific needs and characteristics of each community and child.

Early learning and development standards across U.S. states commonly incorporate approaches that:

Focus on Capabilities:

Care, education, and response to children's developmental needs help build and expand children's capacities and potential. This view considers each child as a social, psychological, and historical being, supporting a democratic education aimed at cultivating future citizens.

Ensure Comprehensive Development:

Expected outcomes cover various developmental domains such as cognitive, social, emotional, physical, and language, to support children's harmonious and well-rounded growth.

Integrate Care and Learning: Care, learning, and development domains should be integrated; learning occurs within care and vice versa.

Outcome Orientation: Expected outcomes are clearly and specifically described, helping teachers and parents understand what children need to achieve.

Respect Diversity:
Expected outcomes are designed to accommodate children's diversity, including children with special needs, from different cultural backgrounds, and with varying developmental levels.

Evidence-Based Evaluation:
Expected outcomes are related to children's participation in practical activities: learning through play and exploration. Assessment methods are developed to track children's progress against expected outcomes.

3.2. Recommendations for Viet Nam:
On Approaches in Developing Expected Learning Outcomes (ELOs):
The ELOs in Early Childhood Education (ECE) curriculum, designed with a competency-based approach, may use various terms in official documents across countries. However, they generally represent what educators expect children, as learners, to achieve after completing the educational program. Therefore, using the term "Expected Learning Outcomes" to denote results that children can achieve through their development, supported by knowledgeable and skilled individuals, along with the child's own efforts, is appropriate. In the competency-based ECE curriculum, ELOs serve as the starting point for teachers to select content, methods, and organize educational activities that support children in achieving ELOs in line with their learning styles.

On Structuring:
ELOs should be structured within a framework that reflects the development and competency-building process of learners—this should be clearly demonstrated in the curriculum. It is important to specify desired competencies in children, recognizing that achieving these competencies requires time, which means that these are long-term ELOs, potentially outlined in the program's general objectives or goals. Competencies are further refined into sub-competencies or components, with the closest ELOs expressed as specific indicators observable in children's educational activities. ELOs should not be seen as static or identical for all children, as each child's development is continuous and has unique features at different stages. While all children go through similar developmental phases, the rate of development and age at which they achieve specific ELOs may vary. A competency-based curriculum should respect these individual differences and support each child in progressing at their own pace.

Ensuring Continuity across Age Groups:
ELOs should be designed to establish strong connections, enabling continuous development as children move from one stage to another.

Presentation and Expression of ELOs:
ELOs are defined by educational domains; In a competency-based ECE curriculum, ELOs serve as the starting point for educational activities, thus are presented before sections on content, methods, and organizational forms of educational activities; ELOs can be expressed clearly, specifically, and measurably. A common approach is to use action verbs from Bloom's Taxonomy, a framework for cognitive levels of thinking. ELOs are thus phrased in sentences beginning with Bloom's action verbs, reflecting what educators hope most children will achieve by a certain age in terms of knowledge, skills, and attitudes. These action verbs might include: recognize, use, express ideas, explore, identify, show enthusiasm, care for, etc. Specific verbs help clarify what learners will do to achieve the expected outcomes:
Remember: Identify, list, describe…
Understand: Explain, summarize, illustrate…
Apply: Practice, use, present…
Analyze: Compare, contrast, analyze…
Evaluate: Evaluate, critique, give opinions…
Create: Design, plan, build…

Using ELOs:
ELOs form the basis for determining content, methods, and forms of education suited to the learner's characteristics; ELOs should not be used to rank or exclude individual children but as tools to support their development; ELOs serve as a means to communicate and increase parental and community engagement in the educational process, helping them support children's learning and development at home; ELOs for children can guide the development of training programs for preschool educators in Viet Nam.

IV. CONCLUSION
The expected learning outcomes (ELOs) in a competency-based ECE curriculum play a crucial role. Studies reveal that despite differing terminology, ELOs consistently express end-of-age expectations through developmental goals, aiming at children's competencies and personal growth across learning domains. These outcomes are commonly expressed as general aspirations for what children should know and be able to do by the end of each age stage, aligning with values and competencies that each country deems essential for its young learners. These represent broad expectations for the knowledge and abilities children should have by the end of each developmental phase.

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