Improving the Competency of Early Childhood Education Students in Vietnam in the Post-COVID-19 Era

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ABSTRACT: Improving the quality of Early Childhood Education students training in the current situation of human resources both redundant and lacking is necessary. The article aims to study the required competency framework of Early Childhood Education teachers in Southeast Asia, including Knowledge of teaching content, pedagogical practice and assessment; Learning environment; Participation and cooperation; Professional development. The article proposes 6 solutions to improve the quality of Early Childhood Education students through 21 competencies of "Knowledge of teaching content, pedagogical practice and assessment" and 25 competencies of "Learning environment" to contribute to the implementation of the new general education program and to build high quality human resources to serve the country.

KEYWORDS: Competency framework, competence development, preschool teachers, Early Childhood Education students

I. INTRODUCTION

Competency framework of Early Childhood Education teachers is based on Bronfenbrenner's 1994 ecological models of human development, which put qualified teachers in the center and proposed Early Childhood Education teachers to demonstrate their competencies through four topics: (1) knowledge of teaching content, pedagogical practice and assessment; (2) learning environment; (3) participation and cooperation; (4) professional development. Education is one of the industries affected by the digital transformation and is facing various challenges created by the rapid and diverse changes in the today's volatile environment. Digital technologies are becoming influential factors driving changes in education, affecting all fields from teaching and learning to activities relating to the institute, teachers and students. The application of research achievements in the fields of digital technology and digital transformation on the new educational model will result in high educational efficiency, speed up the international integration process in education (Nguyen Thi Hong Van and associates, 2019). Besides, the current state of Early Childhood Education teachers is arduous for the education sector to carry out Resolution No. 29-NQ/TW on November 4th, 2013, about fundamental and comprehensive innovation in education and the implementation of General Education Program 2018. The article aims to study the competency framework of Early Childhood Education teachers, from there proposes solutions to improve competency of students in Early Childhood Education in accordance with today's circumstance.

II. RESEARCH RESULTS

2.1. The current state of teachers' competency framework in the era of digital transformation and post COVID-19

The education sector proposed an increase in the number of teachers to serve the implementation of the main General Education Program, concretize the policy of fundamental and comprehensive innovation in education. Besides, COVID-19 has greatly affected countries around the globe, all aspects of life, including education (Tran Thi Van Hoa and associates, 2020). According to UNESCO (2020), the pandemic has affected over 1.5 billion learners worldwide, accounted for 91.3% of the total number of students. This caused some teachers, especially Early Childhood Education ones to stop teaching and find a new job to earn a living. On July 18th, 2022, the Political Bureau's Decision No. 72-QD/TW additionally assigned 65980 full-time teachers from 2022 to 2026; for the year 2022-2023, additionally assigned 27850 full-time Early Childhood Education and public high school teachers. After receiving the Decision from the Political Bureau, the Ministry of Education and Training directed, instructed the local government to deploy the recruitment of Early Childhood Education and high school teachers (27850 full-time teachers in 2022-2023 and 65980 full-time teachers from 2022 to 2026) (Political Bureau, 2022).

Digital transformation will assist in innovating education towards the direction of reducing lectures, impart knowledge to develop the learners' competencies, improve self-study ability, create learning opportunities anytime and anywhere, personalize learning, therefore contribute to creating a lifelong learning society. The inevitability of digital transformation in education is something that educational institutions must confront and adapt, as well as capitalize on the process to expand and improve the efficiency and quality of education (Che Da Thao and associates, 2022).

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The Vietnam's education sector participated in digital transformation and overcame the consequences of COVID-19, therefore with the role of children's educators, competency framework proposed additional characteristics and competencies for teachers' qualifications and work experience; these are crucial factors that contribute to the formation of outcomes related to the overall development of a child. The training of Early Childhood Education teachers in accordance with the new day and age is an extremely urgent matter for educational researchers today.

Competency framework of Early Childhood Education teachers: the competency framework is based on Bronfenbrenner's 1994 ecological models of human development; it recognized, gathered factors that contribute to the overall development of children, emphasized the interaction and communication between children and teachers at schools and other educational environment. Teachers can use the competency framework to determine the areas of competencies that they need to demonstrate throughout the school year and develop plans to improve themselves in accordance with the school's teaching program. Furthermore, they can evaluate the areas that they wish to improve in order to become a team of professional teachers. The competency framework can be used as references to reassess their progress in achieving personal growth-related goals throughout the school year.

Based on Bronfenbrenner's 1994 competency framework, competency standards identified in the research of UNESCO (2020) and SEAMEO (2016), educators' opinions, and Early Childhood Education experts, competency framework of Early Childhood Education demonstrate competency through four topics: (1) knowledge of teaching content, pedagogical practice and assessment; (2) learning environment; (3) participation and cooperation; (4) professional development.

+ Competency group relating to knowledge of teaching content, pedagogical practice and assessment: competency group related to knowledge of teaching content, pedagogical practice and assessment is considered important for Early Childhood Education teachers. Besides, teachers must know the rules, laws, policies, and appropriate standards. Knowledge about the stages of the children's development can help teachers to identify the difficulties, challenges that the children are facing or having any special needs, therefore create favorable conditions for encouraging their learning and development. Teachers can design and implement appropriate Early Childhood Education programs after being prepared, fostered knowledge about the children's learning and development, in which, fun activities are important to their learning process. With the understanding of the children's learning process and their overall development, teachers are competent enough to utilize appropriate tools, strategies to encourage children's development and learning. When teaching ethnic children, communication based on their mother tongue or their first language is a required competency for an Early Childhood Education teacher who focuses on mother tongue-based multilingual education (UNESCO, 2013). Additionally, the utilization of information technology in classrooms to enhance self-study in appropriate circumstances, is a specific competency which Early Childhood Education teachers also need to have.

Table 1. Competencies of Early Childhood Education teachers relating to the learning and overall developing process of children

Core and general competencies	Required supporting competencies
Understand the learning and overall developing process of children: this includes competencies relating knowledge of theories and practices, as well as understanding the children's learning and developing process of Early Childhood Education teachers	1. Demonstrate knowledge of children's rights 2. Show respect to every student and always put children at the center of all teaching and learning activities. 3. Self-equip knowledge on the learning and overall developing process of children, including theory of early childhood development. 4. Self-equip knowledge on relevant laws, policies, standards, and regulations about caring and educating children. 5. Able to explain to colleagues, parents, and other partners who are not in the field of Early Childhood Education relevant knowledge about the learning and developing process of children. 6. Recognize that children develop at different stages, and each has their unique needs, interests and abilities. 7. Able to observe and describe the different characteristics of the children's developing process (e.g., awareness, linguistic, physical, social, emotional, and mental characteristics) 8. Identify children whose development are at risk of being negatively affected and/or having special needs. 9. Understand that children develop under the influence of family circumstances and their surrounding community.
Promote/encourage the learning and developing process of children: this includes competencies relating to strategies that promote/encourage the children's learning and development; the	1. Able to design and implement teaching models that are in accordance with the development orientation, culture, language and considering gender factors in classroom management, based on the approved national frameworks or guidelines.

utilization of assessment-related tools, techniques and outcomes to support the learning and developing process of children	2. Apply knowledge on the learning and developing process of the children to create plans, designs, and implement Early Childhood Education programs.
	3. Encourage and create fun activities to assist the children's learning and development.
	4. Encourage and implement activities, strategies, and classroom management models in accordance with development orientation based on different students' background.
	5. Take advantage of fun-based activities, encouraging learning and teaching strategies to motivate children to think creatively and critically, make decisions, proactively solve problems and help them become positive students.
	Use appropriate tools, strategies, and technologies, including information technology, to promote the development and identify different developmental needs of children.
	6. Prepare, appropriately apply the knowledge of culture, indigenous and locally developed learning materials to create lesson plans, classroom activities in order to encourage learning both inside and outside of the classroom.
	7. Under appropriate and practicable circumstances, able to communicate using the children's mother tongue/first language in teaching and learning.
	8. Monitor, record, and analyze feedback about each child's progress and development according to the approved standards for Early Childhood Education development and learning.
	9. Use the assessment results to reinforce the construction of future classroom activities.
	10. Use the assessment results as references for children whose development are at risk of being negatively affected and showing signs of developmental delay or having other special needs to diagnose, support, and appropriately intervene.
	11. Use the assessment results to evaluate and come up with intervention solutions to help children change and get ready for the transition into Primary Education.

Competency group of Early Childhood Education teachers relating to the learning environment: the forming of a learning environment that meet the developmental needs of children is very important. Therefore, this competency framework especially focuses on two essential competencies relating to the learning environment: (1) building a nurturing, inclusive, and safe environment for children; (2) improve the health, nutrition, safety, and protection of children.

Table 2. Competencies of Early Childhood Education teachers relating to the scope of learning environment

Core and general competencies	Required supporting competencies
Build a nurturing, inclusive, and safe environment. This includes competencies relating to methods teachers use to build a comprehensive environment for children.	1. Provide a safe and beneficial learning environment that helps children feel nurtured, safe and protected.
	2. Build a comprehensive, friendly, and safe environment for children, which satisfies the physical, social, and emotional needs of children.
	3. Provide a learning environment that considers language, culture, and gender to encourage the participation of all students in activities, especially the children with special needs.
	4. Provide a supporting environment that integrates elements of health, nutrition, learning, and child protection.
	5. Prepare an environment that encourage children to develop critical and creative thinking, communication, collaboration, curiosity, empathy, exploration, solving problems, and decision making.

	6. Ensure all resources, technology, and instructional materials used in the classroom are safe, thoroughly cleaned, complete, and appropriately selected. 7. Provide appropriate learning materials for children to bring forth their curiosity, discovery, and creativity. 8. Build a suitable developmental plan for the children's daily learning to form a sense of safety and develop healthy habits in children. 9. Encourage the development of positive relationships, including teacher-parent, teacher-child and child-adult relationships. 10. Communicate with all children with a loving and caring attitude. 11. Actively listen to children and always promptly respond to their needs. 12. Always consistent in setting an example to show children the desired behaviors and attitudes from them. 13. Demonstrate the ability to include inclusive teaching methods that are appropriate for all children of all backgrounds, personalities and abilities 14. Come up with different strategies to help build discipline and encourage positive attitude from children.
Improve health, nutrition, safety, and protection of children. These competencies relate to strategies and activities that ensure the children's needs of health, nutrition, safety, and protection are being paid attention to.	1. Identify and connect children to health, safety, nutrition, and child protection-related services in the community. 2. Implement culturally appropriate policies, regulations, and programs to ensure health, nutrition, safety and child protection. 3. Assist children on their development of self-help skills (eating, dressing, maintaining hygiene, going to the restroom…) in order to encourage good habits and independence in children. 4. Monitor and record any child's needs of health, nutrition, safety, and protection. 5. Prepare children the set of skills to protect themselves from possible threats, dangers to body and mind (teach them about road safety, dangers of interacting with strangers…). 6. Able to recognize dangerous risks/conditions within the children's family (physical abuse, family violence, parents' poor health condition…) can affect their health, safety, and protection. 7. Investigate, report, and refer cases that may lead to child abuse or child neglect to authorities. 8. Immediately perform first aid when children are injured or infected. 9. Is prepared to quickly and appropriately respond to emergencies such as accidents, fires, and natural disasters. 10. Prepare children to appropriately respond in an emergency. 11. Is prepared to respond to or have appropriate support for the children's needs of health, nutrition, safety, protection and well-being, including children who are victims of abuse and neglect.

Moreover, this competency framework has shown that Early Childhood Education teachers is a professional team which requires participation in continuous professional development programs and other specific training programs throughout their career development. Teachers must be lifelong learners to be able to continuously update professional knowledge and skills. They need opportunities for self-assessment and self-improvement, as well as proactively making positive changes in their work.

2.2 Proposal of solutions for improving the competency of Early Childhood Education students during digital transformation and post COVID-19

Raise awareness about the profession, form students' passion for the profession right from the first year: students need to improve their love and affection for the profession to promote positivity, actively and creatively develop students' professional competency in the learning process. Through the modules in the training process of general pedagogical knowledge and professional education, students need to be educated on their role in the country's digital transformation during the era of Industrial Revolution 4.0. Schools can use other methods to raise awareness about the profession such as honoring traditional education Teachers' Day, teachers' values, organizing pedagogical competitions and extracurricular activities, forums of Youth Unions and Associations…

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Innovate contents, training programs and teaching methods to be in line with the requirements of teachers' competency standards: training programs need to be innovated in accordance with the country's ongoing digital transformation and overcome the pandemic's consequences in order to meet the teachers' competency standards. Contents and programs need to be innovated towards the direction of openness, flexibility, and lifelong learning. Teaching methods need to be revised by the faculty team to timely innovate and develop a digital learning ecosystem. In the process of innovating the training program, it is necessary to research towards internationalization and personalization to enable learners to make transitions to into universities, self-study, and lifelong learning.

- Diversify pedagogical training activities: pedagogical practice activities help students to experience the contents of pedagogical training module, learn and equip the basic knowledge about the psycho-physiological characteristics of early childhood age. Teachers can diversify the pedagogical training activities for students in Early Childhood Education through the following methods:

+ Students practice skills to form relationship with parents, family and child care groups, know how to connect and integrate online group networking with suitable partners.

+ Organize competitions among students of different classes and courses; make utensils and toys for Early Childhood children; have exams on pedagogical situation behaviors; promote clean hygiene, healthcare for children; create menus and prepare food for children.

+ Cooperate with student support centers, Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth Unions, Student Associations to organize soft skills training courses such as communication, time management, conflict management, and group activities for students…

+ Cooperate with practice and Early Childhood schools within the province to have students familiarize, experience practical activities such as auditing and visiting classes, organize activities for children such as fun activities, corner activities, object-related activities, outdoor activities, and STEAM orientation activities.

- Upgrade, complete infrastructure system to support students to practice their pedagogical skills, create a safe and all-inclusive education environment:

- Improve operational efficiency of practice rooms such as dance room, nutrition practice room, subject practice room, building an environment or English learning corner for children.

- Build a product display case, train students' professional skills such as teaching aids and children's toys; scientific research products; pedagogical contests' products (topic-related models and pictures…); STEAM products.

- Research on building an open library and document system to quickly integrate with the international. Equip a room for students to practice making new teaching materials, digitalize learning and teaching materials.

- Closely collaborate with practice/Early Childhood schools, Departments of Education and Training throughout training to ensure the continuous professional development of teachers: + invite experts from Departments of Education and Training, supervisors or outstanding teachers from Early Childhood schools to participate in thematic exchanges so that students can answer questions on goals, content, and methods of implementing the new Early Childhood Education program; + collaborate in building a nurturing, inclusive and safe environment; + collaborate with Early Childhood schools to exchange, consult, discuss, together develop a plan to organize knowledge practice, internships, in accordance with the training requirements and practical conditions; + organize sport activities, outstanding teachers' competitions, make utensils and toys at various levels (province, district, facility…) to approach and learn experience in child care and education.

- Create incentive policies: to ensure the team of Early Childhood Education teachers meet the competency standards of teaching in remote and difficult areas, there need to be incentive policies for students; participate in making proposals, develop appropriate policies to ensure long-term career development for teachers.

III. CONCLUSIONS

Based on the descriptions of Early Childhood Education teachers' competency framework, educators can develop the content of training topics for them; design training activities to improve Early Childhood Education teachers' competency, as well as research orientation on competency development, professional development, and other topics related to Early Childhood Education. Teachers can use the competency framework to determine the areas of competencies that they need to demonstrate throughout the school year and develop plans to improve themselves in accordance with the school's or Early Childhood Education center's teaching program. Students evaluate the areas they want to practice in order to become a team of professional teachers. Early Childhood Education teachers and students can use the competency framework as references to reassess their growth in achieving personal goals related to self-development throughout the school year. From the proposed solutions, improving the quality of teacher training in Early Childhood Education is an urgent task to solve the problem of human resources shortage in this field.

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