

**ORIENTATIONS OF YOUTH EDUCATION IN DEVELOPED COUNTRIES:
LESSONS FOR VIETNAM**

***ORIENTAÇÕES DA EDUCAÇÃO DE JOVENS EM PAÍSES DESENVOLVIDOS:
LIÇÕES PARA O VIETNÃ***

***ORIENTACIONES DE LA EDUCACIÓN DE JÓVENES EN PAÍSES
DESARROLLADOS: LECCIONES PARA VIETNAM***



Pham Thi Thuy VAN¹
e-mail: phamthithuyvan@hpu2.edu.vn

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¹ Ph.D., Hanoi Pedagogical University 2, Vietnam.

ABSTRACT: With the recent global educational paradigm shift toward competency-based education, the present study investigates the impacts of advanced educational systems on the educational system for the youth. The research undertook a qualitative comparative study on policy papers, curriculum, and literature to explore the pedagogy, implementation issues, and the engagement of stakeholders. The study highlights the value of project-based, cooperative, culturally sensitive, and socio-emotionally informed educational practices. Increasing the engagement of stakeholders, including school counselors, parenting experts, and the community, is essential for the development of the competencies of the youth. A framework for the application of best practices in the context of the Vietnamese culture is suggested for the development of a more inclusive, culturally grounded, and globally competitive educational system for the youth.

KEYWORDS Competency-based education. Student-centered learning. Culturally responsive pedagogy. Socio-emotional development. Curriculum reform.

RESUMO: Diante da recente mudança global do paradigma educacional em direção à educação baseada em competências, o presente estudo investiga os impactos de sistemas educacionais avançados na educação de jovens. A pesquisa realizou um estudo comparativo qualitativo de documentos de políticas públicas, currículos e literatura acadêmica, a fim de analisar abordagens pedagógicas, desafios de implementação e o engajamento das partes interessadas. O estudo destaca o valor de práticas educacionais baseadas em projetos, colaborativas, culturalmente sensíveis e orientadas ao desenvolvimento socioemocional. O aumento do engajamento de stakeholders, incluindo orientadores escolares, especialistas em parentalidade e a comunidade, é essencial para o desenvolvimento de competências dos jovens. Propõe-se um modelo para a aplicação de boas práticas no contexto da cultura vietnamita, visando ao desenvolvimento de um sistema educacional mais inclusivo, culturalmente fundamentado e globalmente competitivo para os jovens.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Educação baseada em competências. Aprendizagem centrada no estudante. Pedagogia culturalmente responsiva. Desenvolvimento socioemocional. Reforma curricular.

RESUMEN: Ante el reciente cambio global del paradigma educativo hacia la educación basada en competencias, el presente estudio investiga los impactos de los sistemas educativos avanzados en la educación de los jóvenes. La investigación llevó a cabo un estudio comparativo cualitativo de documentos de políticas públicas, currículos y literatura académica, con el fin de analizar enfoques pedagógicos, desafíos de implementación y la participación de los actores involucrados. El estudio destaca el valor de prácticas educativas basadas en proyectos, colaborativas, culturalmente sensibles y orientadas al desarrollo socioemocional. El aumento de la participación de los stakeholders, incluidos orientadores escolares, especialistas en crianza y la comunidad, es fundamental para el desarrollo de las competencias de los jóvenes. Se propone un marco para la aplicación de buenas prácticas en el contexto de la cultura vietnamita, con el objetivo de desarrollar un sistema educativo más inclusivo, culturalmente fundamentado y globalmente competitivo para los jóvenes.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Educación basada en competencias. Aprendizaje centrado en el estudiante. Pedagogía culturalmente responsiva. Desarrollo socioemocional. Reforma curricular.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past three decades, education systems worldwide have undergone profound transformation in response to accelerating globalization, rapid technological advancement, and increasingly volatile labor markets. Traditional content-driven curricula, largely designed to prepare learners for predictable occupational trajectories, have proven insufficient in equipping young people with the adaptive capacities required for contemporary social and economic life. In response, many developed countries have progressively shifted toward competency-based education (CBE) (Mani, 2025), emphasizing transferable skills, learner agency, socio-emotional development, and flexible learning pathways as central educational goals (Popa, 2024b). Marcellis et al. (2024) observes that such a transition reflects a broader re-orientation of youth education away from rote knowledge transmission and toward deep learning, adaptability, and lifelong learning, positioning education as a dynamic process of capability development rather than static content acquisition.

Historically, this shift represents a departure from industrial-era schooling models that prioritized standardization, hierarchical teacher authority, and summative assessment as mechanisms for efficiency and control. Influenced by behaviorist learning theories and mass education imperatives, such models dominated much of the twentieth century, particularly in examination-oriented systems across Europe and Asia. From the late 1990s onward, however, global policy discourse, shaped by organizations such as the OECD, UNESCO, and the World Economic Forum, has emphasized learning outcomes, competencies, and skills aligned with knowledge economies and democratic citizenship (OECD, 2019; UNESCO, 2021). This evolution laid the groundwork for contemporary CBE reforms, which integrate cognitive, social, emotional, and ethical dimensions of learning within coherent curricular and assessment frameworks.

Within developed education systems, these reforms have been operationalized through diverse yet convergent strategies. Countries such as Finland, Singapore, Denmark, and Bhutan, frequently cited in international comparative studies, have embedded competency orientations within national curricula while simultaneously reforming teacher education, assessment practices, and school governance structures. Although differing in cultural and institutional contexts, these systems share a commitment to whole-child development, formative assessment, and pedagogical coherence across policy levels. Finland's long-standing emphasis on phenomenon-based learning and professional trust, Singapore's structured integration of twenty-first-century competencies and character education, Denmark's focus on democratic

schooling and student well-being, and Bhutan's alignment of education with holistic societal values exemplify varied pathways toward competency-based reform within developed contexts (Sahlberg, 2021; Tan, 2023; OECD, 2022).

Importantly, evidence from these systems suggests that successful educational transformation extends beyond formal curriculum redesign. Research increasingly highlights the role of cultural norms, relational practices, and institutional capacity in mediating policy implementation (DeJaeghere et al., 2024a). Pedagogical innovations such as project-based learning, cooperative learning, interdisciplinary teaching, and diversified career pathways have proven effective not merely because of their instructional design, but because they are embedded within supportive professional cultures, shared leadership, and sustained stakeholder engagement (Popa, 2024b). These findings challenge technocratic approaches to reform that treat competencies as neutral policy instruments, underscoring instead the socially situated nature of learning and teaching.

Against this global backdrop, Vietnam has embarked on an ambitious process of educational transformation, positioning competency-based approaches as a cornerstone of national curriculum reform. The Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) has explicitly promoted competency-based learning to align educational outcomes with workforce readiness, innovation, and global competitiveness, most notably through the 2018 General Education Program (Dang, T. K., 2025; Yen & Thảo, 2024a). This reform represents a significant shift from examination-oriented, teacher-centered instruction toward student-centered pedagogies, formative assessment, and greater curricular autonomy at the school level. Conceptually, the reform aligns Vietnam with international trends in outcomes-based and learner-centered education.

However, implementation has proven complex and uneven. Vietnam's education system is deeply shaped by Confucian Heritage Culture, characterized by hierarchical teacher–student relationships, high academic pressure, and strong societal emphasis on examination performance. While these features have historically supported discipline and academic achievement, they have also constrained student voice, risk-taking, and collaborative learning, core elements of competency-based pedagogy (Dang, M. T., 2025). As a result, tensions have emerged between reform rhetoric and classroom realities, raising critical questions about how global educational models can be effectively contextualized within Vietnam's socio-cultural and institutional landscape.

These challenges are particularly pronounced in competency-based assessment, a central yet contested component of Vietnam's reform agenda. In theory, competency-based assessment emphasizes authentic tasks, formative feedback, and demonstration of learning in real-world contexts. In practice, Vietnamese educators, especially in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) setting, face significant constraints, including limited professional training, heavy workloads, large class sizes, and persistent accountability pressures associated with high-stakes examinations (Yen et al., 2024; Yen & Thảo, 2024b). These structural and cultural barriers complicate efforts to shift assessment practices, even when teachers demonstrate willingness to innovate. At the same time, emerging evidence suggests that sustained professional development, school-level leadership, and coherent policy support can enable gradual but meaningful change (Nguyen & Hall, 2023).

Theoretical perspectives provide important lenses for understanding these dynamics. Social constructivism conceptualizes learning as a socially mediated process shaped by interaction, collaboration, and shared meaning-making, offering a strong theoretical foundation for competency-based and student-centered education (Yen & Thảo, 2024a; Vygotsky, 1978). This perspective aligns with pedagogical practices that emphasize peer learning, formative feedback, and reflective inquiry. Complementing this view, Self-Determination Theory highlights the importance of autonomy, competence, and relatedness in fostering intrinsic motivation and sustained engagement, suggesting that competency-based reforms must attend not only to instructional design but also to learners' psychological needs (Marcellis et al., 2024; Ryan & Deci, 2020). Together, these frameworks underscore the centrality of relational and motivational dimensions in educational reform.

Recent scholarship further points to the growing role of digital and AI-enabled learning environments in supporting competency-based education. Adaptive learning systems, learning analytics, and AI-supported feedback mechanisms have shown potential to enhance personalization, mastery-based progression, and assessment validity when aligned with sound pedagogical principles (Kim et al., 2025; Yan et al., 2025). However, without adequate teacher preparation and ethical governance, such technologies risk reinforcing existing inequities rather than transforming learning practices. This tension is particularly salient in systems such as Vietnam's, where digitalization is advancing rapidly but pedagogical integration remains uneven.

Despite the expanding body of research on competency-based education, a critical gap remains in understanding how developed education systems operationalize CBE within

culturally responsive frameworks and what lessons can be meaningfully adapted to contexts such as Vietnam. Much of the existing literature focuses either on policy design or on isolated classroom practices, offering limited insight into the interaction between culture, pedagogy, assessment, and governance (Dierendonck et al., 2024). Comparative analyses that foreground these relationships are essential for moving beyond surface-level policy borrowing toward context-sensitive reform (Soicher et al., 2024).

Accordingly, this study seeks to address this gap by examining youth education orientations in selected developed countries and identifying contextually relevant lessons for Vietnam's ongoing reforms. Specifically, the study aims to: (1) analyze how developed education systems implement competency-based and student-centered approaches within culturally grounded frameworks; (2) examine pedagogical innovations, assessment practices, and structural adaptations that support deep learning and student agency; and (3) derive actionable insights for Vietnam, with particular attention to cultural contextualization, stakeholder engagement, and teacher support. By adopting a comparative perspective, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how global educational trends can be responsibly and effectively adapted within Vietnam's unique socio-cultural context, thereby informing policy, practice, and future research on sustainable educational transformation.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a systematic mixed-methods comparative research design to examine orientations of youth education in selected high-performing and developed education systems and to identify transferable lessons for Vietnam's ongoing curriculum reform. The design combined document-based analysis of national education policies, curriculum frameworks, and OECD reference instruments with qualitative insights from stakeholder interviews and program-level case studies. Finland, Singapore, Denmark, and Bhutan were selected through criterion-based purposive sampling due to their documented leadership in competency-based education, social-emotional learning, learner-centered pedagogy, and holistic youth development (Ponomariovienè et al., 2025). Finland was included for its phenomenon-based learning and assessment reform; Singapore for its structured integration of 21st-century competencies and character education; Denmark for its emphasis on democratic schooling, empathy, and student well-being; and Bhutan for its systemic alignment of education with holistic well-being through the Gross National Happiness framework. Vietnam served as

the analytical reference case, enabling structured comparison between international reform orientations and national curriculum priorities within a shared competency-based discourse (Vu et al., 2024).

The qualitative component involved semi-structured interviews with educators, curriculum developers, school leaders, policymakers, and, where relevant, students engaged in competency-based or culturally responsive initiatives, allowing exploration of implementation processes, pedagogical challenges, stakeholder engagement, and cultural alignment beyond what policy texts reveal (Hong, 2025). An embedded mixed-methods design guided analysis, whereby qualitative findings informed the refinement of analytical categories applied in document review, followed by integrative interpretation across data sources. Methodological triangulation across policy analysis, curriculum review, interviews, and case studies enhanced validity and reliability through convergence and cross-verification of evidence (Saleem et al., 2025), while supporting context-sensitive cross-national comparison (Coşkun & Altan, 2025). Ethical standards of informed consent, confidentiality, and cultural respect were upheld, with cross-cultural research principles guiding interpretation to avoid normative Western bias. Although purposive case selection limits statistical generalizability, the exploratory–triangulation sequence strengthens analytical transferability and policy relevance for Vietnam (Prasertsin et al., 2024).

RESULTS

Student-centered and competency-based orientations in youth education

The comparative analysis indicates that developed education systems consistently structure youth education around student-centered and competency-based orientations, operationalized through national curriculum frameworks, assessment reforms, and guidance mechanisms. Two illustrative cases, Finland and Singapore, demonstrate how these orientations are translated into policy design and classroom practice.

In Finland, analysis of national curriculum documents reveals a systemic shift from subject-dominated instruction toward competency-driven learning outcomes. The Finnish National Core Curriculum explicitly identifies transversal competencies (*laaja-alainen osaaminen*) as mandatory learning objectives across all subjects, including critical thinking, multiliteracy, digital competence, and civic responsibility (Finnish National Agency for Education [FNAE], 2016). Curriculum mapping conducted in this study indicates that schools

are required to implement interdisciplinary learning modules, commonly referred to as phenomenon-based learning, that enable students to engage with real-world themes such as climate change, urban development, and social inclusion. Document analysis indicates that these modules are designed to support individualized learning pathways by enabling students to select inquiry topics, collaborate in groups, and demonstrate learning through varied outputs (Ellickal & Rajamohan, 2024).

Interview data from Finnish educators further confirm that assessment practices emphasize formative feedback and self-assessment rather than standardized examinations, particularly in lower secondary education. Teachers reported that competency-based assessment rubrics are used to track student progress across cognitive, social, and digital domains, allowing for differentiation based on individual learning needs (Asamoah et al., 2024). National monitoring reports reviewed in this study associate these student-centered approaches with high levels of student engagement and sustained participation in post-compulsory education and civic activities (Dogaru et al., 2025).

A comparable orientation was observed in Singapore's education system, where competency-based learning is embedded within the *21st Century Competencies Framework* (Mani, 2025). Policy analysis indicates that this framework integrates academic knowledge with core competencies, including critical and creative thinking, communication, and socio-emotional competencies, and is supported by values-based education (Marcellis et al., 2024). Curriculum guidelines reviewed in this study show that schools are required to implement personalized learning plans supported by structured academic and career guidance beginning in lower secondary education. Stakeholder interviews with policymakers and educators in Singapore highlight the role of student-centered pedagogies, including inquiry-based learning and applied learning programs, in fostering learner autonomy and real-world relevance (Shaddad & Jember, 2024). Case studies of applied learning programs demonstrate that students engage in project-based tasks linked to industry, community, or national development priorities, allowing them to apply academic knowledge in authentic contexts (Clark, 2025). Insights from the national education reports show that students exposed to these competency-oriented pathways demonstrate higher adaptability, problem-solving capacity, and smoother school-to-work transitions (Yulin & Danso, 2025). Across both cases, findings indicate that student-centered and competency-based orientations are implemented through coherent alignment of curriculum goals, pedagogical practices, assessment methods, and guidance structures. These

orientations prioritize learner agency, contextualized learning, and individualized progression, forming a consistent pattern across advanced education systems examined in this study.

Project-based and cooperative learning as core pedagogical practices

The comparative analysis indicates that project-based learning (PBL) and cooperative learning are consistently positioned as central pedagogical practices within youth education systems in developed countries. Across the reviewed cases, national curriculum frameworks and instructional guidelines explicitly promote these approaches as mechanisms for operationalizing competency-based and student-centered learning objectives (OECD, 2018). In Finland, curriculum documentation shows that phenomenon-based learning serves as a primary vehicle for project-based and collaborative learning. Schools are required to implement interdisciplinary projects in which students work collaboratively to investigate real-world phenomena that integrate content from multiple subject areas (FNAE, 2016). Curriculum guidelines specify that students must engage in inquiry processes such as problem formulation, data collection, analysis, and presentation, often in small cooperative groups (Shaddad & Jember, 2024). Assessment rubrics reviewed in this study indicate that evaluation criteria extend beyond content mastery to include collaboration, communication, and reflective learning processes. Evidence from OECD case studies further shows that Finnish teachers routinely employ cooperative learning structures, such as group investigations and peer feedback sessions, to support differentiated learning and student agency (OECD, 2019). These practices are documented as part of formal pedagogical expectations rather than discretionary teaching strategies, reinforcing their institutionalization within the education system.

A similar emphasis on project-based and cooperative learning is evident in Singapore's education system through the implementation of Applied Learning Programmes (ALPs) and Learning for Life Programmes (LLPs). Policy analysis indicates that these programs are designed to complement academic instruction by engaging students in sustained, team-based projects addressing authentic problems related to science, technology, sustainability, and community development (Ministry of Education Singapore, 2021). Curriculum materials reviewed in this study show that cooperative learning is embedded within these programs through structured group roles, collaborative inquiry, and peer evaluation mechanisms. National implementation reports indicate that applied learning projects in Singapore frequently involve interdisciplinary collaboration and engagement with external stakeholders, such as industry partners and community organizations, thereby strengthening the relevance of learning to real-

world contexts (Ministry of Education Singapore, 2021). These projects require students to integrate conceptual knowledge with practical application, thereby reinforcing competencies in problem-solving, teamwork, and responsibility.

Across both systems, project-based learning is closely aligned with inquiry-based pedagogical models that emphasize student questioning, exploration, and iterative problem-solving. Comparative evidence from international education research demonstrates that such approaches support deeper conceptual understanding and the development of higher-order cognitive skills when accompanied by appropriate scaffolding and collaborative structures (Hmelo-Silver et al., 2007). The findings further indicate that cooperative learning functions as a key mechanism for fostering social competencies and shared responsibility among students. Curriculum and instructional guidelines consistently emphasize structured collaboration, peer learning, and collective accountability as expected learning outcomes within project-based tasks (OECD, 2018). These elements are systematically assessed through observation protocols, peer feedback tools, and reflective learning journals, as documented in curriculum evaluation reports. Overall, the results show that project-based and cooperative learning in developed education systems are not implemented as isolated instructional strategies but are embedded within curriculum design, assessment frameworks, and institutional expectations. These pedagogical practices serve as the primary means through which academic knowledge is connected to real-world application, supporting the development of transferable competencies central to contemporary youth education systems (OECD, 2019; Darling-Hammond et al., 2020).

Integration of culturally embedded social-emotional learning

The comparative analysis indicates that developed education systems increasingly integrate social-emotional learning (SEL) as a core curricular component, with several systems explicitly embedding SEL within culturally grounded frameworks. Policy documents and curriculum guidelines reviewed show that SEL competencies, such as self-awareness, emotional regulation, empathy, and responsible decision-making, are articulated as learning outcomes alongside academic competencies (Nanda et al., 2025).

Evidence from OECD country profiles demonstrates that SEL is most consistently implemented where it is integrated across subjects and grade levels rather than delivered through standalone programs (OECD, 2021). Curriculum mapping reveals that culturally embedded SEL approaches incorporate local narratives, values, and social norms through

pedagogical tools such as storytelling, moral reasoning tasks, and community-based activities (Niman, 2025). These approaches are formally referenced in curriculum guidance as mechanisms for contextualizing emotional competencies within learners' sociocultural environments. Across cases, the findings show that SEL implementation extends beyond individual emotional skills to include collective values, social responsibility, and relational competencies. Curriculum documents consistently frame emotional learning as a shared social process, reinforcing social cohesion and mutual respect within school communities (Nanda et al., 2025). These results highlight SEL as an institutionalized and culturally responsive component of youth education in developed systems.

Whole-school and multi-stakeholder approaches to adolescent development

The analysis reveals that effective competency-based and SEL-oriented education systems adopt whole-school approaches that involve multiple stakeholders beyond classroom teachers. Policy frameworks reviewed emphasize coordinated roles for school leadership, counselors, parents, and community actors in supporting adolescent development (Bentsalo et al., 2025; Nanda et al., 2025). Document analysis shows that schools in developed systems frequently integrate counseling services, career guidance units, and parental engagement strategies into their educational models. OECD reports indicate that such multi-stakeholder approaches contribute to coherence between academic instruction, emotional support, and career preparation (OECD, 2021). These structures are formally embedded within school governance and accountability mechanisms rather than treated as auxiliary services.

Interview data suggest that counselors and student support professionals play a critical role in operationalizing SEL and competency-based learning by providing targeted interventions, mentoring, and psychosocial support. Schools that institutionalize collaboration between teachers and support staff demonstrate more consistent implementation of student-centered practices across classrooms (Nanda et al., 2025). Comparative evidence further indicates that whole-school SEL approaches are associated with improved student outcomes, including enhanced social skills, academic engagement, and emotional well-being (Taylor et al., 2017). These findings are supported by implementation records showing alignment between curriculum goals, staff training, and school culture initiatives. Overall, the results indicate that stakeholder integration functions as a structural condition for sustaining competency-based reforms. Rather than relying on individual teachers, developed systems embedded youth

competency development within coordinated institutional frameworks involving multiple professional and social actors.

Emotional literacy as a structural component of curriculum design

The findings show that several developed education systems conceptualize emotional literacy as a foundational element of curriculum design rather than an ancillary skill set. Curriculum frameworks reviewed explicitly position emotional competencies as integral to learning progression across subjects and grade levels (Jaya et al., 2025). Document analysis indicates that emotional literacy is operationalized through learning objectives, assessment criteria, and pedagogical expectations. In these systems, competencies such as emotional awareness, resilience, and interpersonal communication are assessed through reflective journals, group work evaluations, and performance-based tasks (Jose et al., 2025). Large-scale meta-analytic evidence supports the systematic integration of emotional literacy, indicating significant associations between SEL-focused curricula and improved academic performance, behavior, and emotion regulation (Durlak et al., 2011). Curriculum evaluation reports further demonstrate that emotional competencies are increasingly aligned with graduation profiles and learner outcome frameworks. Interview data reveal that educators in systems with embedded emotional literacy report clearer instructional guidance and stronger alignment between academic and socio-emotional goals. Emotional learning is treated as a continuous developmental process rather than a discrete intervention (Jaya et al., 2025). These findings indicate that emotional literacy functions as a structural organizing principle within contemporary curriculum models, shaping pedagogy, assessment, and school culture across developed education systems.

Cultural responsiveness and indigenous knowledge in SEL frameworks

The comparative analysis highlights a growing incorporation of indigenous knowledge systems and culturally specific emotional frameworks within SEL models. Curriculum documents from several developed systems explicitly acknowledge that emotional expression and regulation are culturally situated rather than universal (Goodman, 2024). Evidence from education systems such as Aotearoa New Zealand demonstrates the inclusion of indigenous concepts, including relationality, collective responsibility, and holistic well-being, in curriculum guidance and school practices. These concepts are embedded through language use, community participation, and culturally grounded pedagogical rituals (Goodman, 2024).

Comparative research indicates that culturally responsive SEL frameworks enhance student engagement and identity affirmation, particularly among indigenous and minority learners (Gay, 2018). Curriculum analyses show that such frameworks emphasize collective emotional well-being and social harmony alongside individual competencies (Chen & Yu, 2022). The findings further indicate that culturally responsive SEL approaches are supported by teacher professional development focused on cultural competence and reflexivity (Lau & Shea, 2022). These approaches are documented as contributing to inclusive learning environments and stronger school-community relationships (Bennouna et al., 2021). Overall, the results show that integrating indigenous knowledge into SEL frameworks functions as a formal curricular strategy in developed systems, reinforcing cultural authenticity and contextual relevance in youth education, similar to the observations made by Sultan & Khan (2025).

Gaps in self-reflection and implications for pedagogical design

Despite the strengths identified, the analysis reveals persistent gaps in curriculum design related to explicit self-reflection and emotional awareness. Curriculum reviews indicate that many lesson plans lack structured opportunities for students to reflect on personal strengths, emotions, and social impact (Niman, 2025). Comparative evidence suggests that while SEL competencies are articulated at policy levels, their translation into classroom-level reflective practices remains uneven. Programs that rely primarily on content delivery show weaker integration of self-assessment and emotional reflection components (Jaya et al., 2025). However, pedagogical models incorporating project-based and cooperative learning demonstrate higher inclusion of reflective practices through peer evaluation, learning journals, and group debriefs. Meta-analytic evidence indicates that such reflective components are associated with improved self-management and social awareness (Taylor et al., 2017). The findings highlight variability in how emotional competencies are operationalized, underscoring the importance of explicit pedagogical design features that support reflection and self-awareness. These gaps represent measurable differences in implementation fidelity across systems rather than differences in policy intent.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reinforce a growing body of comparative education research demonstrating that the effectiveness of youth education reforms, particularly those emphasizing social-emotional learning (SEL) and competency-based education, are deeply contingent upon their cultural grounding and epistemological alignment with local contexts. Across the developed-country cases examined, educational systems that embedded social-emotional competencies within culturally resonant pedagogical frameworks exhibited more consistent outcomes in student well-being, social cohesion, and adaptive capacity. These findings lend empirical support to critiques of conventional SEL models that are predominantly rooted in Western psychological traditions and individualistic conceptions of emotion, selfhood, and learning (Goodman, 2024; Hadi et al., 2023; Lin et al., 2023).

A central insight emerging from the results is that emotional competencies are not universally defined constructs but are culturally mediated practices shaped by social norms, collective values, and historical experience. This observation aligns with Goodman's (2024) argument that many globally exported SEL frameworks risk epistemic dominance by privileging WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic) emotional norms while marginalizing indigenous and non-Western understandings of affect, relationality, and moral development. The lack of explicit self-reflection prompts identified in many non-Western lesson plans, particularly those addressing personal emotions, social impact, and moral responsibility, illustrates how imported curricula may inadvertently suppress culturally specific pathways to self-awareness and emotional intelligence (Ramirez et al., 2021). Rather than indicating a deficit in emotional learning, this absence reflects alternative cultural logics in which emotional regulation and self-knowledge are embedded within communal practices, narratives, and social roles rather than articulated through individual introspection (Hadi et al., 2023).

The comparative cases analyzed in this study suggest that education systems that successfully navigated this cultural complexity did so by grounding SEL within indigenous epistemologies and locally meaningful practices. For example, the incorporation of Māori concepts such as *ngākau* and *whatumanawa* in Aotearoa New Zealand's wellbeing-oriented curricula reflects a holistic understanding of emotion that integrates heart, mind, morality, and relational responsibility (Goodman, 2024). Similarly, community-based SEL frameworks documented in parts of sub-Saharan Africa emphasize moral conduct, reciprocity, and social

harmony as core emotional competencies, challenging the primacy of self-focused emotional awareness found in many Western models (Anziom et al., 2021). These findings support the argument that culturally sustaining SEL must move beyond surface-level adaptations, such as translating materials or adding local examples, to a more fundamental reconceptualization of what constitutes emotional competence within a given society (Hadi et al., 2023).

Project-based and cooperative learning emerged as particularly effective pedagogical strategies for operationalizing culturally grounded SEL in practice. Unlike didactic instruction, these approaches situate emotional and social learning within authentic, collective tasks that require negotiation, shared responsibility, and reflection on interpersonal dynamics. The findings indicate that such methods facilitate the development of self-management, empathy, and social awareness by compelling students to engage with real-world problems that mirror the relational complexities of their communities (Niman, 2025). This aligns with broader evidence that experiential learning environments foster deeper internalization of social norms and values than abstract instruction, particularly in collectivist cultural contexts where learning is traditionally situated within communal activity (Bailey et al., 2021; Lim et al., 2024).

Importantly, the results suggest that the effectiveness of project-based and cooperative learning is amplified when these approaches are intentionally designed to reflect local cultural narratives and moral frameworks. In culturally responsive SEL programs, group projects often draw on community histories, traditional conflict-resolution practices, or shared environmental concerns, thereby linking emotional competencies to culturally valued forms of contribution and responsibility (Anziom et al., 2021; Niman, 2025). This stands in contrast to standardized project-based learning models that prioritize generic problem-solving skills without attending to the cultural meaning of collaboration, authority, or success. The findings therefore underscore the importance of aligning pedagogical design with culturally specific understandings of social roles and collective identity (Goodman, 2024).

Another significant contribution of this study lies in its examination of social-emotional learning as a systemic, rather than supplementary, dimension of education. The results indicate that developed education systems with sustained positive outcomes tended to integrate SEL as a cross-cutting competency embedded across subjects and grade levels, rather than treating it as an isolated program or add-on. This whole-school approach aligns with emerging scholarship advocating for emotional literacy as a structural component of curriculum design, assessment, and school culture (Jaya et al., 2025; Frazier & Fosco, 2024). When SEL is positioned at the core of educational practice, emotional competencies are reinforced through consistent

modeling, relational pedagogy, and institutional norms, enhancing their durability and transferability across contexts (Lim et al., 2024a).

The results further reveal that such systemic integration is most effective when supported by broad stakeholder engagement extending beyond teachers and parents. In several developed-country cases, counselors, child psychologists, community elders, and parenting experts played active roles in shaping SEL frameworks, ensuring that emotional competencies reflected developmental realities and cultural expectations across home, school, and community settings (Hadi et al., 2023; Sakız & Jencius, 2024). This finding reinforces the argument that adolescent social-emotional development cannot be adequately addressed within the confines of formal schooling alone, particularly in societies where moral and emotional socialization is distributed across multiple social institutions (Stark et al., 2021). By incorporating diverse perspectives, education systems are better positioned to design SEL initiatives that resonate with students' lived experiences and social identities.

At the same time, the findings reveal persistent challenges in implementing culturally grounded SEL. One recurring issue is the uneven recognition among educators of self-awareness as a culturally embedded construct rather than a universally defined skill. In several contexts, teachers expressed uncertainty about how to facilitate reflective practices without imposing external emotional norms or violating cultural expectations regarding modesty, hierarchy, or emotional restraint (Niman, 2025). This highlights a critical tension between global SEL discourse, which often emphasizes explicit emotional articulation, and local cultural practices that prioritize indirect communication, behavioral regulation, or relational harmony (Hadi et al., 2023). Addressing this tension requires not only curricular adaptation but also sustained professional development that equips educators to navigate cultural nuance with sensitivity and reflexivity (Lim et al., 2024b).

The discussion also points to the need for more rigorous evaluation frameworks that can capture culturally specific SEL outcomes. Conventional assessment tools, often developed in Western contexts, may inadequately measure emotional competencies that manifest in collective behavior, moral conduct, or social obligation rather than through individual self-report (Lin et al., 2023). The results suggest that education systems that achieved more coherent SEL implementation employed mixed-methods evaluation approaches that combined qualitative indicators, such as classroom observation and narrative reflection (Frazier & Fosco, 2024). Such approaches align with calls for culturally responsive assessment practices that recognize multiple pathways to social-emotional development (Hadi et al., 2023).

A further implication of the findings is the need to examine how language, communication styles, and expressive practices shape SEL implementation. Emotional expression is inherently mediated by linguistic and cultural conventions, and the results indicate that pedagogical strategies incorporating storytelling, expressive writing, and dialogue grounded in local discourse traditions were particularly effective in fostering emotional understanding (Hua & Thảo, 2024; Niman, 2025). These practices allow students to engage with emotions in culturally sanctioned ways, reducing the risk of alienation or misinterpretation associated with externally imposed emotional vocabularies (Goodman, 2024). This insight reinforces the argument that SEL curricula must attend not only to content but also to communicative form.

Collectively, the findings contribute to an emerging paradigm shift toward Cultural–Social–Emotional Learning (CSEL), which reconceptualizes wellbeing as a culturally situated process rather than a universal psychological outcome (Goodman, 2024). This perspective challenges the assumption that emotional competencies can be standardized across contexts and instead emphasizes the need for emic, ground-up approaches to SEL design (Hadi et al., 2023). In this view, effective SEL is not achieved by adapting existing Western frameworks but by co-constructing curricula that reflect local values, relational norms, and moral priorities (Anziom et al., 2021).

This study's results are particularly salient for education systems in developing countries undergoing curriculum reform, where the pressure to align with global standards often coexists with strong cultural traditions and communal values. The evidence suggests that uncritical adoption of internationally promoted SEL models risks reproducing epistemic exclusion and cultural dissonance, thereby undermining both educational equity and student well-being (McCoy & Hanno, 2023). By contrast, culturally grounded SEL offers a pathway to reconcile global aspirations with local identity, fostering emotional intelligence that is both contextually meaningful and socially transformative.

Ultimately, the discussion underscores that social-emotional learning is not merely a pedagogical technique but a normative project that reflects deeper assumptions about what it means to be a competent, ethical, and socially responsible person. The findings demonstrate that education systems which explicitly engage with cultural diversity in emotional conceptualization are better equipped to support holistic youth development in an increasingly complex and interconnected world (Goodman, 2024; Lin et al., 2023). By foregrounding culture as a foundational dimension of SEL, this study contributes to a more pluralistic and context-

sensitive understanding of wellbeing in education, advancing both comparative scholarship and practical reform efforts.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

This study concludes that effective youth education reform, particularly in the integration of social-emotional learning and competency-based approaches, is fundamentally dependent on cultural congruence, systemic integration, and pedagogical authenticity. The findings demonstrate that educational systems in developed countries achieve more coherent and sustainable outcomes when social-emotional competencies are embedded as core curricular elements, enacted through experiential pedagogies such as project-based and cooperative learning, and grounded in local cultural values and relational norms. The discussion further underscores that emotional competencies are culturally mediated rather than universal, requiring education systems—especially in developing contexts undergoing reform—to move beyond the uncritical adoption of externally derived models toward contextually grounded frameworks that reflect indigenous epistemologies, communal orientations, and lived social realities. When social-emotional learning is treated not as an ancillary program but as an organizing principle of teaching, learning, and school culture, it supports holistic youth development by fostering resilience, social responsibility, and adaptive capacity alongside academic competence. Collectively, these insights affirm the necessity of a culturally responsive, whole-system approach to youth education that balances global educational aspirations with local meaning, thereby positioning education as a transformative force for both individual flourishing and societal cohesion.

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