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## **Ecological Integration of Social-Emotional and Life Skills Education in Vietnamese Primary Schools: A Whole-School Reform Model**

**Pham The Hung**

Faculty of Political Education and Educational Management, Dong Thap University, Vietnam

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Corresponding Author: **Pham The Hung**

### **Abstract**

Life skills education (LSE) has become a strategic priority within contemporary educational reform, particularly in competency-based systems such as Vietnam's General Education Curriculum 2018. However, implementation at the primary level remains fragmented, content-heavy, and insufficiently aligned with developmental psychology and ecological systems theory. Drawing upon a systematic synthesis of Vietnamese and international literature, policy documents, and empirical school-based reports, this study develops a theoretically grounded and practice-responsive framework to enhance life skills education for Vietnamese primary students. Anchored in WHO's life skills framework,

UNESCO's competency-based paradigm, Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, and social-emotional learning (SEL) research (Durlak *et al.*, 2011) [4], the article proposes five integrative solutions: (1) Whole-school SEL integration; (2) Structured family-school partnership; (3) Experiential and contextualized pedagogy; (4) Teacher professional capacity building; and (5) Multi-tiered support and evaluation mechanisms. The proposed framework advances coherence between policy, pedagogy, assessment, and school culture, contributing a scalable model aligned with Vietnam's reform agenda and international quality standards.

**Keywords:** Life Skills Education, Primary Education, Social-Emotional Learning, Ecological Systems Theory, Vietnam, Competency-Based Curriculum

### **1. Introduction**

In the 21st-century knowledge economy, education systems worldwide are undergoing a paradigmatic shift from content transmission toward competency development. This transition reflects the recognition that academic knowledge alone is insufficient for sustainable personal, social, and economic participation. Contemporary education must cultivate transferable competencies—cognitive, social, emotional, and ethical—that enable learners to navigate complexity, uncertainty, and rapid social transformation.

International organizations have played a decisive role in conceptualizing life skills within this competency-based agenda. The World Health Organization (1999) [13] defines life skills as psychosocial abilities that enable individuals to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life, emphasizing adaptive and positive behavior in real-world contexts. Similarly, UNESCO (2015) [12], in its global education framework, underscores transversal competencies—communication, collaboration, critical thinking, and responsible citizenship—as foundational for inclusive and sustainable development. These perspectives align with OECD's competency frameworks, which conceptualize key competencies as integrative combinations of knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values necessary for functioning in modern societies (OECD, 2018).

Empirical research provides strong support for the systematic integration of life skills and social-emotional competencies within school curricula. A landmark meta-analysis of 213 school-based interventions conducted by Durlak *et al.* (2011) [4] demonstrated that structured social and emotional learning (SEL) programs significantly improved students' social behaviors, emotional regulation, and academic achievement, with an average gain of 11 percentile points in academic performance. The framework developed by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) has become globally influential, articulating five interrelated domains: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. These domains reflect an integrative model that connects emotional competence with ethical reasoning and responsible action.

From a theoretical standpoint, life skills education is grounded in multiple complementary paradigms. Bronfenbrenner's

ecological systems theory situates child development within interconnected systems—family, school, community, and broader sociocultural structures—highlighting the importance of coherence across environments. Bandura's social learning theory emphasizes modeling, observational learning, and self-efficacy as mechanisms through which life skills are acquired. Experiential learning theory (Kolb, 1984) [7] further posits that skills emerge through cycles of concrete experience, reflection, conceptualization, and application. Collectively, these theoretical foundations suggest that effective life skills education must be systemic, experiential, and contextually embedded rather than fragmented or didactic.

Within Vietnam, life skills education has been formally recognized in national educational discourse for nearly two decades. Policy documents issued by the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET, 2013) emphasize the integration of life skills into general education. Vietnamese scholars such as Nguyen Thanh Binh (2007) [9], Huynh Van Son (2009) [6], and Đinh Thị Kim Thoa (2009) [3] have systematized theoretical and pedagogical foundations for life skills and value education, highlighting their role in personality formation and moral development. The General Education Curriculum 2018 institutionalizes competency-based reform, explicitly identifying autonomy, communication, cooperation, and problem-solving as core student competencies to be cultivated across subjects.

Despite this policy alignment, substantial structural and pedagogical challenges remain in Vietnamese primary schools. First, life skills education is frequently implemented as an extracurricular or supplementary activity rather than as an integrated curricular priority. Such marginalization limits continuity and reduces its developmental impact. Second, classroom pedagogy remains predominantly teacher-centered, with an emphasis on knowledge transmission and examination performance. This approach constrains opportunities for experiential engagement, reflection, and collaborative learning—processes essential for skill acquisition. Third, assessment systems largely prioritize cognitive outcomes and lack robust behavioral or competency-based indicators capable of capturing socio-emotional growth. Fourth, teacher preparation programs often provide insufficient training in SEL methodologies, experiential pedagogy, and classroom climate management. Finally, coordination between families and schools is uneven, resulting in inconsistent behavioral expectations and weakened skill internalization across contexts.

These structural gaps reflect a deeper systemic issue: the absence of an integrated, theory-driven, and contextually responsive model capable of aligning policy, pedagogy, assessment, teacher capacity, and family engagement. Without such coherence, life skills education risks remaining rhetorical rather than transformative.

Accordingly, there is an urgent need to develop a comprehensive framework for enhancing the effectiveness of life skills education in Vietnamese primary schools. Such a framework must synthesize international empirical evidence with local educational realities, ensuring both theoretical rigor and practical feasibility. By situating life skills education within an ecological, competency-based paradigm, it becomes possible to move beyond fragmented interventions toward a sustainable and scalable model that supports holistic child development and aligns with

Vietnam's broader educational reform agenda.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1 Research Design

This study employs a systematic integrative literature review combined with policy synthesis to construct a theoretically grounded and contextually responsive framework for enhancing life skills education in Vietnamese primary schools. The integrative review method is appropriate for synthesizing empirical research, theoretical models, and policy documents within complex educational reform contexts (Whittemore & Knafl, 2005; Snyder, 2019).

#### The data corpus includes five interrelated sources:

(1) National policy documents issued by Vietnam's Ministry of Education and Training (MOET), particularly the General Education Curriculum 2018 and official guidelines on life skills and competency-based education; (2) Vietnamese scholarly works on life skills, value education, and child development (e.g., Nguyễn Thanh Bình, 2007; Huỳnh Văn Sơn, 2009; Đinh Thị Kim Thoa *et al.*, 2009) [9, 6, 3]; (3) International normative frameworks from the World Health Organization, UNESCO, and OECD; (4) Peer-reviewed empirical studies and meta-analyses evaluating the effectiveness of social and emotional learning (SEL) interventions (e.g., Durlak *et al.*, 2011; Taylor *et al.*, 2017) [4, 11]; (5) Implementation reports and professional training materials from Vietnamese primary schools to ensure contextual feasibility.

Inclusion criteria required that documents provide explicit conceptualizations of life skills or SEL, empirical evidence of effectiveness, or policy guidance relevant to primary education. This strategy ensured both scientific rigor and policy relevance.

### 2.2 Analytical Framework and Synthesis Procedures

The analysis is grounded in four complementary theoretical perspectives to ensure conceptual coherence and explanatory depth.

First, Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) [2] frames life skills development as embedded within interconnected systems—family, school, and broader sociocultural contexts—thereby justifying a systemic rather than classroom-limited approach.

Second, Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977) [1] informs the emphasis on modeling, practice, feedback, and self-efficacy as mechanisms of skill acquisition.

Third, the CASEL social and emotional learning framework provides a structured taxonomy of five core competencies—self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making—used as analytical categories.

Fourth, public health prevention models, particularly multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS), guide the differentiation of universal, targeted, and intensive interventions to enhance scalability and equity.

All selected documents were coded using a structured analytical matrix across five domains: (1) conceptual definitions of life skills; (2) pedagogical approaches; (3) implementation conditions and systemic requirements; (4) assessment mechanisms; (5) empirical evidence of effectiveness.

Comparative synthesis identified areas of convergence between international evidence and Vietnamese policy orientations, as well as contextual gaps—particularly in

pedagogy, teacher preparation, and competency-based assessment. This systematic triangulation of theory, empirical research, and local practice enabled the development of an integrated framework that is both scientifically grounded and practically adaptable within Vietnamese primary education.

### 3. A systemic ecological framework for life skills education reform in vietnamese primary schools

Grounded in ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) [2], social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) [1], and competency-based educational reform, this study proposes a five-component systemic framework to enhance the effectiveness of life skills education (LSE) in Vietnamese primary schools. The framework integrates international empirical evidence with national policy orientations under the General Education Curriculum 2018 (MOET, 2018) [8], ensuring both theoretical robustness and contextual feasibility.

#### ***Solution 1: Whole-school Integration of Social-Emotional Learning (SEL)***

A whole-school approach to SEL is essential for ensuring the coherence, sustainability, and effectiveness of life skills education in Vietnamese primary schools. Fragmented or extracurricular implementations fail to generate durable behavioral change because socio-emotional competencies are internalized only when consistently reinforced across institutional contexts. Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory underscores the importance of environmental coherence, while Bandura's social learning theory highlights modeling and repeated interaction as mechanisms of skill acquisition. Together, these perspectives justify embedding SEL within the daily structures of schooling rather than isolating it as a supplementary program.

Robust empirical evidence supports this systemic orientation. A meta-analysis of 213 school-based interventions found that comprehensive SEL implementation significantly improved social behavior, emotional regulation, and academic achievement (Durlak *et al.*, 2011) [4], with longitudinal effects extending to reduced risk behaviors and enhanced psychosocial adjustment (Taylor *et al.*, 2017) [11]. These findings indicate that institutional integration—not episodic activities—is the primary driver of sustained impact.

In the Vietnamese context, although the General Education Curriculum 2018 formally integrates life skills within moral education and experiential activities (MOET, 2018) [8], implementation often remains compartmentalized. A whole-school SEL model addresses this gap through four interrelated mechanisms: (1) curricular integration of SEL competencies across core subjects; (2) restorative disciplinary practices that promote accountability and empathy; (3) school-wide value frameworks grounded in autonomy and respect; and (4) collaborative pedagogies such as cooperative learning and reflective dialogue.

By aligning curriculum, classroom interaction, and institutional culture, whole-school SEL integration strengthens emotional regulation, peer relationships, and academic engagement, while reducing behavioral incidents. Such ecological coherence transforms life skills education from policy rhetoric into measurable developmental outcomes within Vietnam's competency-based reform framework.

#### ***Solution 2: Structured family–school partnership model***

A structured family–school partnership constitutes a critical mesosystemic component in enhancing life skills education for primary students. According to Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, children's development is optimized when key microsystems—particularly home and school—operate in coherence. In the absence of alignment, inconsistent behavioral expectations across contexts may weaken the internalization of self-regulation, responsibility, and social norms. Within the Vietnamese context, rapid urbanization and increasing parental overprotection have, in some cases, limited children's autonomy development, thereby reinforcing the necessity of coordinated educational practices.

Empirical research supports the centrality of parental involvement in socio-emotional development. Social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) [1] emphasizes modeling as a primary mechanism through which children acquire behavioral patterns. International evidence similarly demonstrates that parental autonomy support and consistent emotional coaching are associated with stronger self-regulation and adaptive functioning in children. Vietnamese scholarship on life skills education (Nguyen Thanh Binh, 2007; Huynh Van Son, 2009) [9, 6] also highlights the family's foundational role in value formation and character development.

Operationally, a structured partnership model should include four integrated components. First, schools should develop standardized life skills communication materials that articulate core competencies, behavioral expectations, and reinforcement strategies in accessible language for parents. Second, periodic parent workshops should be organized to strengthen capacity in autonomy support, constructive discipline, and socio-emotional coaching. Third, digital communication platforms should be established to enable continuous, bidirectional feedback regarding students' behavioral progress. Finally, schools should explicitly promote parental modeling of empathy, responsibility, and respectful communication, reinforcing the normative framework established within the school.

When implemented systematically, this partnership model enhances behavioral consistency across home and school environments, strengthens the internalization of self-regulation and responsibility, and mitigates overprotective tendencies that may hinder autonomy development. By transforming families into active co-educators rather than peripheral stakeholders, the model reinforces ecological coherence and significantly amplifies the long-term effectiveness of life skills education in Vietnamese primary schools.

#### ***Solution 3: Experiential and contextualized pedagogy***

Experiential and contextualized pedagogy constitutes a central mechanism for operationalizing life skills education in primary schools. Life skills are not abstract knowledge units that can be transmitted through didactic instruction; rather, they are competencies constructed through action, reflection, and social interaction. Kolb's experiential learning theory (1984) posits that effective learning occurs through a cyclical process of concrete experience, reflective observation, conceptualization, and active experimentation. Similarly, Bandura's social learning theory emphasizes practice, modeling, and feedback as key processes in behavioral acquisition. These theoretical foundations affirm

that life skills must be enacted within meaningful contexts to become internalized and transferable.

First, structured role-play and simulation of real-life dilemmas should be systematically integrated into classroom practice. Ethical scenarios, peer conflict situations, and problem-solving tasks provide students with safe environments to rehearse decision-making, empathy, and communication skills. Such simulations bridge abstract moral concepts with lived behavioral application.

Second, project-based learning (PBL) linked to authentic community issues should be implemented to situate learning within real-world relevance. By engaging students in collaborative inquiry—such as environmental protection, school improvement initiatives, or community service planning—schools foster responsibility, cooperation, and civic awareness while strengthening cognitive and social competencies simultaneously.

Third, service-learning initiatives should extend experiential engagement beyond classroom boundaries. Structured opportunities for social contribution, when combined with guided reflection, cultivate empathy, ethical reasoning, and a sense of social responsibility. This approach reinforces the integration of values and action, which is central to competency-based reform.

Finally, systematic reflective practices, including student journals, peer feedback sessions, and guided self-assessment, must accompany experiential activities. Reflection transforms experience into learning by enabling students to analyze emotions, evaluate decisions, and plan behavioral adjustments. Without reflection, experiential activities risk remaining episodic rather than developmental. When coherently implemented, experiential and contextualized pedagogy yields measurable developmental outcomes. Students demonstrate enhanced problem-solving and responsible decision-making competencies, improved ability to transfer skills from school settings to everyday contexts, and strengthened personal agency. By positioning learners as active participants rather than passive recipients, this pedagogical model transforms life skills education into a dynamic process of competency construction aligned with Vietnam's competency-based educational reform.

#### ***Solution 4: Professional development and instructional coaching***

Professional development and instructional coaching represent a decisive leverage point in ensuring the effectiveness and sustainability of life skills education in primary schools. Educational reform initiatives frequently fail not because of conceptual weakness, but because of insufficient implementation capacity. Empirical synthesis of over 800 meta-analyses demonstrates that teacher efficacy and instructional quality are among the strongest school-based predictors of student outcomes (Hattie, 2009) [5]. Accordingly, the successful institutionalization of social-emotional learning (SEL) and life skills education depends fundamentally on strengthening teachers' professional competencies.

From a theoretical perspective, social learning theory underscores the importance of modeling and guided practice, implying that teachers must themselves internalize SEL principles before facilitating them in students. Furthermore, implementation science indicates that ongoing coaching and feedback mechanisms are more effective than one-off training sessions in sustaining pedagogical change.

A coherent professional development framework should therefore include four integrated components.

First, mandatory SEL certification modules should be incorporated into both pre-service and in-service teacher education. These modules must address theoretical foundations (e.g., emotional regulation, classroom climate, restorative practices) and provide structured tools for lesson design, facilitation, and competency-based assessment aligned with the General Education Curriculum 2018.

Second, instructional coaching cycles should be institutionalized. Through structured processes of classroom observation, reflective dialogue, and targeted feedback, teachers engage in iterative improvement (observe–reflect–improve). Coaching fosters professional growth while maintaining fidelity to program objectives.

Third, professional learning communities should be established at the school level. Collaborative inquiry among teachers promotes shared problem-solving, exchange of best practices, and collective accountability for student development outcomes.

Finally, practice-based workshops should replace predominantly theoretical seminars. Demonstration lessons, peer modeling, and micro-teaching simulations enhance practical competence and reduce the gap between theory and classroom application.

When implemented systematically, this professional development model yields measurable improvements in teacher confidence, facilitation skills, and classroom climate. It enhances consistency and fidelity of SEL implementation across classrooms, thereby reducing variability in student outcomes. Most importantly, sustained instructional coaching transforms life skills education from a policy directive into an embedded professional practice, ensuring long-term institutionalization within Vietnam's competency-based educational reform framework.

#### ***Solution 5: Multi-tiered support and competency-based assessment***

An effective life skills education system must recognize student heterogeneity in psychosocial development, learning readiness, and contextual vulnerability. A universal-only approach, while necessary, is insufficient to address the differentiated needs of at-risk or marginalized students. Drawing on public health prevention models—particularly Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS)—a tiered framework enables schools to combine universal promotion with targeted and intensive interventions, thereby enhancing both equity and effectiveness (Sugai & Horner, 2009) [10].

From a developmental perspective, early identification and graduated support are critical for preventing the escalation of behavioral and emotional difficulties. Within the Vietnamese primary school context—characterized by large class sizes and examination pressures—systematic differentiation remains limited. A multi-tiered structure provides a practical mechanism for aligning life skills education with inclusive and competency-based reform objectives.

##### **The framework operates across three interrelated tiers.**

First, *Tier 1 (Universal Support)* involves the implementation of a structured SEL curriculum for all students. This level establishes common behavioral expectations, shared value norms, and foundational competencies such as self-regulation, empathy, cooperation, and responsible decision-making. Universal provision

ensures prevention at scale and contributes to a positive school climate.

Second, *Tier 2 (Targeted Interventions)* provides small-group support for students exhibiting emerging behavioral, emotional, or social difficulties. Structured group sessions focusing on conflict resolution, emotional regulation strategies, or peer relationship skills allow early intervention before problems intensify. This tier relies on systematic screening and teacher referrals.

Third, *Tier 3 (Intensive Individualized Support)* offers personalized counseling, case management, and referral mechanisms for students with significant psychosocial needs. Collaboration with school counselors, psychologists, and external agencies strengthens support continuity and safeguards student well-being.

To ensure coherence with competency-based reform, differentiated support must be accompanied by robust assessment mechanisms. Schools should develop behavioral rubrics aligned with national competency standards, clearly articulating observable indicators of socio-emotional growth. Additionally, portfolio-based assessment and structured observational checklists should be employed to document developmental progress longitudinally rather than relying solely on summative evaluation.

When implemented systematically, this multi-tiered and assessment-integrated model yields several outcomes: early identification of at-risk students, timely and proportionate intervention, and data-informed decision-making at both classroom and institutional levels. Moreover, the integration of competency-aligned assessment tools ensures consistency with Vietnam's General Education Curriculum 2018, reinforcing the shift from knowledge-based evaluation toward holistic student development.

By embedding differentiation, prevention, and evidence-based assessment within life skills education, this framework enhances inclusivity, strengthens accountability, and supports sustainable reform implementation in Vietnamese primary schools.

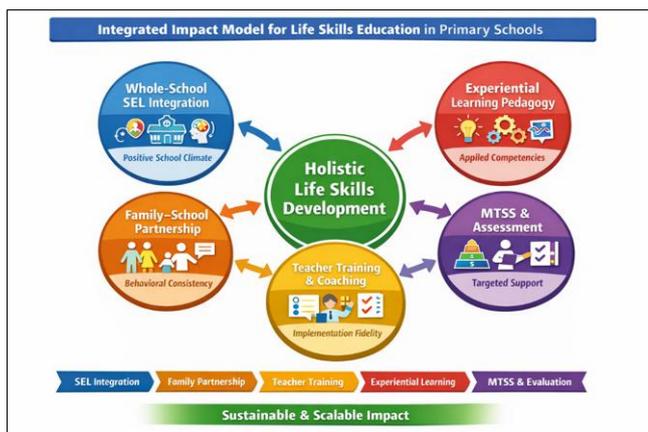


Fig 1: The intergrated model of life skills education in Vietnam

#### 4. Conclusion

Life skills education in Vietnamese primary schools must evolve from peripheral, activity-based implementation toward a systemic, competency-aligned model embedded within the core architecture of schooling. The present analysis demonstrates that international evidence on Social and Emotional Learning, experiential pedagogy, teacher effectiveness, ecological coherence, and multi-tiered support

converges strongly with the strategic orientation of Vietnam's General Education Curriculum 2018.

The proposed integrated framework—comprising whole-school SEL integration, structured family-school partnership, experiential and contextualized pedagogy, sustained professional development, and multi-tiered support with competency-based assessment—offers a theoretically grounded and practically viable pathway for reform. Its strength lies in ecological coherence: curriculum, school climate, instructional practice, family engagement, and differentiated support operate as interdependent subsystems rather than isolated initiatives.

This model is feasible within existing institutional structures and scalable across regions, provided that implementation fidelity and professional capacity are systematically strengthened. Future longitudinal and quasi-experimental studies are needed to empirically validate its impact on behavioral regulation, academic engagement, and psychosocial adjustment, thereby consolidating evidence-based advancement of life skills education in Vietnam.

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