

From curricular protection to curricular fragmentation: Examining Türkiye's centralized ECE curriculum for child sexual abuse prevention

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ABSTRACT

Child sexual abuse (CSA) remains one of the most pressing and sensitive challenges facing societies worldwide. In Türkiye, this issue is further exacerbated by cultural taboos, systemic barriers, and underreporting, which hinder effective prevention and intervention efforts. This study examines how Türkiye's centralized Early Childhood Education (ECE) curriculum, the "Maarif Model," incorporates CSA prevention strategies through a structured framework. Using qualitative content analysis, the research investigates the inclusion of critical topics such as bodily autonomy, personal boundaries, and safe practices for children aged 36–72 months. A SWOT analysis sheds light on both the potential and the limitations of the curriculum's design and implementation. While the Maarif Model offers a promising platform for fostering early intervention and resilience, significant challenges remain. Cultural resistance, inadequate teacher training, and inconsistent application threaten its efficacy. This study underscores the need for more substantial efforts to align the curriculum with Türkiye's socio-cultural realities, emphasizing that without addressing systemic and societal barriers, the curriculum's impact may fall short of its transformative goals.

KEYWORDS: Child sexual abuse; Curriculum; Early childhood education; Child rights; Sexual abuse

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1. Introduction

Joël Le Scouarnec, a French surgeon convicted of sexually abusing hundreds of children; Steven van de Velde, a convicted Dutch rapist of a 12-year-old girl, controversially permitted to compete internationally despite his conviction; and Gerald Ridsdale, the infamous Australian Catholic priest whose decades of abuse were shielded by church authorities are the names (Casassus, 2025; Ligman, 2025; Miller, 2025), scattered across countries and professions, represent a chilling truth, which is that child sexual abuse (CSA) is not confined by geography, profession, or ideology. It leaves lasting scars, not only on survivors (Abrahams et al., 2013; Asgary et al., 2013; Crome & McCabe, 1995; Depraetere et al., 2020; Morrison, 2007; Stepakoff, 1998; Thomas & Kopel, 2023; Winkler, 1991) but also on families and communities (Daane, 2005; Lievore, 2005; Morrison, 2007). Survivors often face systemic barriers to justice, compounded by societal stigma that silences their voices and shields perpetrators (Ahrens, 2006; Hall & Last, 1993; Morrison, 2007). These concerns have contributed to increasing attention to prevention approaches that equip children with

developmentally appropriate knowledge about their bodies, personal boundaries, unsafe situations, and ways of seeking assistance.

There is an ongoing fight to protect the vulnerable. Among them (Baker et al., 2009; Cayreyre et al., 2024; Luce et al., 2010; Macy et al., 2007; Macy, 2008; Valan et al., 2024; WHO, 2023), children are particularly at risk, often targeted by individuals with harmful intentions; therefore, CSA is a fact of life. Studies show that CSA often goes unreported (Chandran et al., 2018; Katzenstein & Fontes, 2017; Kenny, 2001; Mathews et al., 2017; Osadan & Reid, 2015), as children lack the knowledge or confidence to disclose their experiences. In Türkiye, CSA is a pervasive issue, with alarming rates of crimes against children, including sexual abuse, compounded by cultural taboos and limited preventive mechanisms (Aydin et al., 2015; Apaydın Cırık et al., 2020; Citak Tunc et al., 2018; Kızıltepe et al., 2022; Koç et al., 2023; Koçtürk & Yüksel, 2018; Kucuk, 2016; Ozbaran et al., 2009; Turla et al., 2022), underscoring the urgent need for CSA education and prevention starting at an early age.

This paper aims to explore how ECE can serve as the frontline in equipping children and caregivers to address this pressing issue and foster a safer, more informed future. To that point, Türkiye's national ECE curriculum (MoNE, 2024a) has been specifically chosen to examine a country that has been famous for such cases. As teacher educators, we are often caught between the macrosystem of mandatory national curricula and the microsystem of the classroom where immediate child protection occurs. This paper reflects on the pedagogical challenge of preparing pre-service teachers in Türkiye to implement the Maarif Model when that very model contains a null curriculum regarding explicit sexual abuse terminology. The following analysis is driven by the need to transform teacher candidates from passive implementers of a centralized framework into critical practitioners capable of bridging these systemic gaps. This study aims to critically assess Türkiye's ECE curriculum within this context by asking: "How does Türkiye's Early Childhood Education Curriculum address concepts relevant to child sexual abuse prevention, and what curricular opportunities exist to strengthen their coherence, developmental appropriateness, and integration?" By evaluating the curriculum's alignment with Türkiye's cultural and societal context, this research seeks to identify both gaps and opportunities for improvement. Strengthening the ECE curriculum is not only essential for preventing CSA but also for fostering a generation that is equipped to build healthier, safer communities.

1.1. Why School-Based CSA Prevention Programs?

In the context of CSA, education plays a critical role in empowering children to identify and report inappropriate behavior. Because children often lack awareness of sexual abuse and self-protection skills, prevention programs play a crucial role in enhancing their understanding and resilience (Kenny et al., 2008). Schools, as primary educational institutions, are ideal settings for such programs due to their capacity to reach diverse groups of children in a cost-effective manner (Wurtele, 2009). Most empirically evaluated interventions in developing countries have concentrated on children of preschool and primary school age, highlighting the importance of tailoring prevention efforts to these formative years (Russell, Higgins, & Posso, 2020); although research indicates that CSA education programs can be beneficial for children across all age groups (Currier & Wurtele, 1996; Kenny et al., 2008; Roberts & Miltenberger, 1999; Topping & Barron, 2009; Wurtele, 1986; 1996; Wurtele & Owens, 1997). School-based CSA prevention programs empower children with age-appropriate knowledge about their rights, body autonomy, and safe practices, fostering open communication and resilience (Citak Tunc et al., 2018; Finkelhor, 2009; Russell et al., 2020; Walsh et al., 2015). By adopting a multidimensional approach that involves every stakeholder of education (Erol, 2007; Işık & Değirmencioğlu, 2018; Özmen, 2021), these programs create a supportive network that encourages early identification of risks and facilitates support for those who disclose abuse (Özmen, 2021).

Furthermore, schools' established infrastructure, equipped with trained personnel and resources, enables the seamless integration of these programs into the educational curriculum.

Despite their potential, these programs face significant challenges. Cultural and societal taboos around discussing abuse can lead to resistance both by parents and teachers (Lu et al., 2022), while inadequate training for teachers (Allen et al., 2020; Çalışandemir et al., 2008; Dolunay-Cug, 2022; Lu et al., 2022; Topping & Barron, 2009; Zeuthen & Hagelskjær, 2013), as well as a lack of educational resources to teach CSA prevention-related content (Helweg-Larsen et al., 2010), may hinder effective implementation. Overcoming these challenges requires sustained efforts, including stakeholder engagement, comprehensive training, and robust follow-up systems. When effectively implemented, school-based CSA prevention programs become vital tools in fostering safer communities, mitigating abuse's long-term impacts, and safeguarding children's rights and well-being.

1.2. Why ECE?

ECE provides a critical opportunity to address CSA prevention proactively. As a foundational stage in a child's development (Freud, 1905; Erikson, 1963; Bloom, 1976; Vygotsky, 1967; Bruner, 1977; Bandura, 1986; Piaget, 2013), ECE serves as an ideal platform to teach age-appropriate concepts such as body autonomy, consent, and personal boundaries (Wurtele et al., 1992), as well as knowledge regarding safety (Kenny et al., 2016). If children are taught early to recognize inappropriate behavior and understand their rights, they are better prepared to navigate challenging situations. By teaching children the correct anatomical terms as early as possible (Wurtele et al., 1992), school-based CSA prevention programs lay the foundation for future sexual education, enabling children to communicate effectively about inappropriate touch (Boyle & Lutzker, 2005). While the integration of CSA prevention education into early childhood curricula is still limited in many countries (Allen et al., 2020; Demircioğlu & Işık, 2019; Lu et al., 2022; Rispens et al., 1997; Rudolph & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2018; Walsh et al., 2015), Pitts' (2015) suggestion that early childhood CSA prevention programs are being well-received by parents and educators, with no significant negative effects, such as increased anxiety or fear, arising from participation must be if not only encouraging to do so than at least to explore the topic more detailly.

1.3. Why Türkiye?

The widespread issue of CSA within the Catholic Church reflects its global scale (Girod, 2024), whereas the top European countries with the highest reported rates of sexual violence are Sweden, Iceland, and Norway (Statista, 2024b), which are frequently considered to be the most gender-equals in the world (Statista, 2024a). The Turkish context also provides an important setting for examining the relationship between national curriculum and CSA prevention. Türkiye's rating on CSA is unclear because of unreported cases (Berkmen & Seçim, 2019; Doğru et al., 2024; Dolunay-Cug, 2022; Silahlı et al., 2024; Sivilis-Cetinkaya, 2015; Yüksel & Koçtürk, 2020). However, Türkiye's past includes harrowing scandals that have exposed institutional shortcomings and societal blind spots in protecting children. The Karaman child abuse scandal, in which dozens of boys were abused by a teacher associated with the Ensar Foundation, became a national flashpoint (Cerrah et al., 2020; Çevik, 2019; Günaydın & Aşan, 2017). Despite public outrage, this scandal, along with others that followed, was often met with outright attempts at damage control by those in power, raising doubts about the sincerity of institutional reforms.

While the 2010 constitutional amendments codified childrens' rights at the highest legal level in Türkiye (Güler, 2022), questions remain about their practical impact. Scandals like the Karaman case not only reveal systemic failures but also highlight the challenges posed by politicization, as

childrens' rights are frequently debated under the shadow of broader political agendas. Furthermore, mechanisms like parliamentary inquiries and oversight tools, which could bring accountability and transparency, remain underutilized in addressing childrens' rights issues. The Grand National Assembly of Türkiye's research commissions, while theoretically more resistant to political influence, have yet to fulfill their potential in tackling systemic negligence (Güler, 2022). Addressing such failures requires a bipartisan and transparent approach, yet Türkiye's political environment often obstructs such unity, leaving critical issues unresolved (Balci, 2021; Gül, 2008; Ömürlüoğlu, 2020; Tunçel, 2017; Yolcu, 2022). This raises concerns about whether Türkiye's educational reforms genuinely aim to protect children or serve as symbolic gestures to placate public discontent after decades of neglect and scandal. Although official narratives stress progress and reform (MoNE, 2024b; Özer, 2023; 2024), skepticism persists as the public continues to question the sincerity and depth of state's efforts to prioritize children's rights in both policy and practice.

1.4. Why the ECE Curriculum in Türkiye?

The recently introduced "Türkiye Century Maarif Model" (hereafter, TCMM) (MoNE, 2024b) has been heralded by policymakers as a transformative framework, emphasizing virtue, value, and action for the national education system (Özer, 2024). Türkiye's highly centralized education system, in which the TCMM curriculum is applied uniformly across the nation, presents both challenges and opportunities. Unlike decentralized systems such as those in Canada or the United States, where local authorities often shape curriculum design (Feiger, 2024), Türkiye's centralized educational management ensures consistency across regions and socio-economic contexts. While this structure enables widespread implementation of educational reforms, it also raises concerns, particularly given Türkiye's history of superficial or politicized reforms. However, if leveraged effectively, the centralized system could allow policymakers to enact significant changes that reach children from diverse backgrounds with consistent messaging and strategies.

In this context, while Türkiye has made remarkable progress in expanding access to early childhood education, with 95.44% of children aged 5 to 6 enrolled in formal education programs as of 2024 (MoNE, 2024c), there is a critical need to examine the integration of CSA prevention education within the ECE curriculum. By utilizing the centralized nature of the TCMM, there is a unique opportunity to incorporate CSA prevention strategies nationwide, ensuring that all children, regardless of background, receive the same foundational education on body autonomy, consent, and personal boundaries. This alignment could significantly contribute to both individual resilience and a broader cultural shift towards respect and accountability.

To understand the implications of this study, it is necessary to define the highly centralized nature of the Turkish education system. Unlike the bottom-up approaches found in North America or Scandinavia, the MoNE exercises absolute authority over curriculum design, textbook approval, and teacher directives. This structure creates a Single Point of Success or Failure. Because the TCMM is applied uniformly across all 81 provinces, any null curriculum, such as the omission of explicit sexual abuse terminology, becomes a nationwide systemic gap. Conversely, the recent gross enrollment increase of five-year-olds to 95.44% means that even a minor curriculum improvement has the power to protect millions of children simultaneously. The stakes of this analysis, therefore, are not local, but national in scale.

2. Method

2.1. Research Design

This study employed qualitative document analysis to examine the TCMM Early Childhood Education Curriculum (MoNE, 2024a). Qualitative document analysis is appropriate when researchers seek to examine how a particular issue is represented, organized, emphasized, or omitted within an existing document (Morgan, 2022). The study was designed as a curriculum-focused inquiry rather than an evaluation of curriculum implementation. The analysis was informed by qualitative content-analysis principles (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008, Morgan, 2022) and by critical curriculum concepts concerning explicit, hidden, and null curricula (Apple, 2004; Eisner, 1985; Flinders et al., 1986; Giroux, 1983). These concepts were used as interpretive lenses rather than as separate empirical methods. The primary empirical procedure was the systematic examination of curriculum content relevant to CSA prevention. SWOT analysis was subsequently used as an interpretive synthesis tool. It was not treated as an additional method for generating empirical findings. Its purpose was to organize the implications of the documentary findings into strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats while distinguishing curriculum-based observations from broader contextual considerations.

2.2. Data Source and Analysis

The primary data source was the Early Childhood Education Curriculum published by Türkiye's Ministry of National Education as part of the Türkiye Century Maarif Model (MoNE, 2024a). The curriculum covers children aged 36–72 months and includes developmental objectives, learning outcomes, and related pedagogical guidance. The unit of analysis was defined as a discrete curriculum statement or pedagogical passage that addressed, directly or indirectly, one or more concepts relevant to CSA prevention. These concepts included bodily autonomy, personal space, private body parts, boundaries, touch, acceptable and unacceptable interactions, self-protection, help-seeking, trusted adults, and secrets. The analysis also considered the age group and curricular domain in which each relevant element appeared because the distribution of content is important to evaluating its coherence and developmental coverage. The analysis did not treat every occurrence of general concepts such as *respect* or *responsibility* as evidence of CSA prevention. Such concepts were considered CSA-relevant only when their curricular context connected them to bodily boundaries, personal safety, inappropriate interaction, self-protection, or related protective practices. This distinction was introduced to reduce the risk of interpreting general moral or social-emotional objectives as CSA-prevention content without sufficient documentary support.

The analysis proceeded in several stages. First, the curriculum was examined for explicit and conceptually related references to bodily autonomy, personal boundaries, private body parts, touch, safety, self-protection, help-seeking, disclosure, trusted adults, and secrets. Relevant passages were recorded and considered in relation to their developmental age group and curricular domain. Second, the identified passages were organized into conceptually related categories. These categories focused on (1) bodily autonomy and personal space; (2) self-protection and help-seeking; and (3) educator and institutional support. These categories correspond to the principal patterns identified in the curriculum and form the basis of the Findings section. Third, the analysis considered not only the presence of relevant content but also its organization and explicitness. Particular attention was given to whether the curriculum explicitly connected individual protective concepts to CSA prevention, whether concepts appeared across developmental stages, and whether the curriculum provided a coherent progression from body awareness to recognition of inappropriate behavior and help-seeking.

Fourth, passages that appeared to provide contradictory evidence were retained in the interpretation rather than treated as exceptions to be discarded. In particular, the explicit presence of private-body-part terminology, good/bad touch, good/bad secrets, and help-seeking was considered alongside the absence of a clearly articulated overarching CSA-prevention framework. This approach was necessary to avoid the conceptual error of equating the absence of the term *child sexual abuse* with the absence of CSA-relevant educational content.

Finally, the findings were synthesized using a SWOT framework. In this stage, strengths and weaknesses were restricted primarily to characteristics observable in the curriculum itself. Opportunities and threats were treated as interpretive implications informed by the curriculum and relevant literature rather than as direct empirical findings about implementation or society. Claims about teacher competence, classroom practice, parental responses, institutional effectiveness, or societal attitudes were therefore not treated as findings of the document analysis.

2.3. Trustworthiness and Reflexivity

Because the study involves interpretive analysis of a policy document, analytical transparency was prioritized over claims of statistical reliability. The researchers distinguished documentary evidence from interpretation and from normative recommendations throughout the analysis. Interpretive claims were anchored in identifiable curriculum content and were considered against relevant scholarship on CSA prevention and curriculum studies. The researchers also approached the analysis reflexively, recognizing that concepts such as *null curriculum*, *hidden curriculum*, and *bodily autonomy* carry theoretical assumptions. Rather than beginning from the assumption that the TCMML lacked CSA-prevention content, the analysis examined both evidence of inclusion and evidence of omission or under-specification. This was particularly important because the curriculum contains several explicit protective elements. The resulting interpretation therefore emerged from the tension between substantive inclusion and limited curricular integration, rather than from a predetermined conclusion that CSA prevention was absent.

2.4. Limitations

While this study provides a systematic examination of Türkiye's Early Childhood Education Curriculum regarding child sexual abuse (CSA) prevention, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the empirical scope of this research is strictly limited to the written curriculum document published as part of the Türkiye Century Maarif Model (MoNE, 2024a). This study does not include empirical data gathered from classroom observations, teacher interviews, parent reports, children's perspectives, or actual implementation contexts. Consequently, claims regarding how these curriculum objectives are interpreted, taught, or experienced in practice cannot be established from the present data. Second, while the SWOT analysis provides an interpretive synthesis of curriculum strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats, the broader contextual factors, such as teacher preparation, implementation consistency, and regional variations are discussed as implications supported by literature rather than as directly observed phenomena. Future research incorporating qualitative and quantitative fieldwork with educators, administrators, and parents will be essential to understanding how these curricular components translate into everyday classroom practices.

2.5. Rationale

In Türkiye, CSA remains culturally taboo and frequently underreported. Addressing this issue roots the discussion early in global rights frameworks and sets clear expectations. For example, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) guarantees children the right to protection

from all forms of abuse (UNICEF, 1989), and the World Health Organization (WHO, 2019) explicitly calls for schools to play an active role in violence prevention. In this regard, Türkiye's national curriculum risks missing an opportunity to meet global benchmarks that frame child protection as both an educational and public health priority.

A curriculum is never a neutral tool; it actively reflects and reinforces societal priorities. Although ECE holds immense potential for early intervention, CSA prevention is frequently neglected in formal education systems. When topics like CSA are omitted, they signal discomfort, stigma, or outright denial. Furthermore, unspoken norms, power dynamics, and traditional expectations within education often prioritize blind obedience and respect for authority over critical thinking, making it harder for children to speak up about abuse. From a critical curriculum perspective, integrating CSA prevention into ECE is not merely an add-on; it challenges the status quo and invites a fundamental shift in how children's rights, bodily autonomy, and safety are approached in education.

This approach is especially urgent given the unprecedented reach of nationwide ECE implementation. According to official data, gross pre-primary enrollment for five-year-olds increased from 55.35% in the 2012/2013 academic year to 95.44% in 2023/2024 (MoNE, 2024c). For children aged 3 to 5, the enrollment rate grew from 30.93% to 57.23% over the same period. This massive expansion means that curriculum choices; specifically, what is included, excluded, or avoided, have direct consequences for nearly all children entering formal education in Türkiye. Consequently, the curriculum becomes a powerful site for either long-overdue change or continued silence around CSA.

Viewed through the lens of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979), a child's development is shaped by multiple environmental layers, including the microsystem (family and school), mesosystem (interactions between settings), and macrosystem (cultural and political ideologies). ECE curricula occupy a critical intersection across these systems. When national curricula fail to provide children with developmentally appropriate knowledge regarding personal safety, boundaries, and abuse prevention, they miss an essential opportunity to intervene at an early, formative stage.

3. Findings

The analysis identified three interrelated areas through which the TCMM ECE curriculum addresses concepts relevant to CSA prevention, namely (1) bodily autonomy and personal space, (2) self-protection and disclosure strategies, and (3) educator and institutional support. The findings indicate that the curriculum contains substantive protective content. At the same time, the content is distributed across learning outcomes and pedagogical guidance rather than being consistently organized under an explicit CSA-prevention framework.

3.1. Bodily Autonomy and Personal Space

The curriculum integrates explicit components aimed at preventing CSA, particularly within the "Active Living through Psychomotor Skills" domain for children aged 60–72 months. This part of the curriculum emphasizes fostering general and personal space awareness, teaching children to "differentiate between general and personal spaces" and to act in ways that respect their personal boundaries (MoNE, 2024a, p. 75). A key focus is on developing bodily autonomy and an understanding of boundaries, enabling children to "identify private body parts" and "distinguish between good and bad touch, as well as acceptable and unacceptable interactions." (MoNE, 2024a, p. 76). Children are expected to articulate their body's position in space and demonstrate respect for personal boundaries during physical movement.

When analyzed through the lens of the hidden curriculum, the TCMM's emphasis on respect and acceptable interactions within the Active Living domain risks reinforcing a pedagogy of obedience rather than one of empowerment. By prioritizing general physical movement boundaries over specific anatomical safety, the implicit message conveyed to children is that bodily autonomy is a matter of etiquette rather than a fundamental right to protection. This hidden curriculum potentially silences the very protective actions the explicit curriculum aims to foster.

3.2. Self-Protection and Disclosure Strategies

Learning outcomes include the ability to articulate their body's position in space, recognize and differentiate general and personal spaces, and demonstrate respect for personal boundaries in their movements and actions. The curriculum also encourages children to protect themselves from intrusions into their personal space by shouting, seeking help, or moving to a safe location when needed, emphasizing that "children should respond by shouting, screaming, moving to a safe place, and seeking help from trusted adults." (MoNE, 2024a, p. 76). Teachers play a critical role in this process by introducing children to the concept of private body parts and explaining circumstances where exposure or contact is acceptable, such as "during medical examinations with a parent present." Additionally, through collaboration with school guidance services, children are supported in recognizing and responding to inappropriate behavior, "distinguishing between good and bad secrets" and understanding that "a good secret might involve something like a birthday surprise, while a bad secret involves someone saying not to talk about inappropriate touch." (MoNE, 2024a, p. 76). This proactive and structured approach reflects a comprehensive effort to address CSA prevention within ECE, highlighting the potential of centralized curricula to equip children with essential self-protection skills.

3.3. The Role of Educators and Institutional Support

The TCMM outlines a multi-disciplinary approach where early childhood teachers share responsibility for safety education. Teachers are tasked with introducing correct anatomical concepts and explaining appropriate contexts for physical contact, such as medical examinations performed in the presence of a parent. The involvement of school guidance services is highlighted as a strength that ensures a multidisciplinary and supportive network for the child. This centralized approach ensures that these self-protection skills are, in theory, delivered consistently to all children enrolled in formal education across Türkiye.

3.4. Interpretive SWOT Synthesis

The SWOT framework is used here as an interpretive synthesis rather than as an independent source of empirical findings. The categories below distinguish characteristics observable in the curriculum from contextual considerations derived from the literature.

3.4.1. Strengths

The first strength is the presence of explicit protective content. The curriculum includes bodily and personal-space awareness, identification of private body parts, distinctions between acceptable and unacceptable touch, self-protection strategies, help-seeking, and distinctions between good and bad secrets (MoNE, 2024a). These elements provide a substantive foundation upon which a more coherent prevention framework could be developed. A second strength is the developmental placement of explicit personal-safety content within ECE. The concentration of several relevant outcomes in the 60–72-month period provides an opportunity to introduce protective concepts during the preschool years. A third strength is the inclusion of educator and guidance-service roles. The curriculum recognizes that children's safety education requires adult involvement rather than relying

exclusively on children's individual responses. Finally, the national character of the curriculum provides substantial potential reach. A common national framework can provide a shared baseline for educational expectations, although the present study does not evaluate whether that baseline is implemented consistently across schools.

3.4.2. Weaknesses

The principal curriculum-level weakness identified in the analysis is fragmentation. Relevant concepts are present, but they are not consistently organized as an explicit CSA-prevention framework. The curriculum therefore provides protective components without clearly articulating the conceptual relationships among bodily autonomy, private body parts, inappropriate touch, secrecy, disclosure, and help-seeking. A related weakness is under-specification. The curriculum provides important learning outcomes but gives less explicit indication of how these concepts should be sequenced developmentally and integrated across the ECE curriculum. The absence of a clearly articulated prevention framework does not mean that prevention content is absent; rather, it leaves its organization and pedagogical integration less visible. A further weakness concerns the distinction between general values and child-protection concepts. Values such as respect and responsibility can support safe interpersonal relationships, but they do not substitute for explicit child-protection education. A stronger curriculum could make clearer how broad values connect to concrete protective knowledge.

3.4.3. Opportunities

The existing protective content provides a foundation for further curriculum development. Rather than introducing CSA prevention as an entirely new area, curriculum developers could strengthen the connections among concepts already present in the TCMM. Body awareness, private body parts, personal space, touch, secrecy, help-seeking, and trusted adults could be organized into a more explicit developmental progression. Teacher education represents another opportunity. Because the curriculum already assigns educators a role in addressing sensitive safety concepts, teacher-preparation programs could use the existing learning outcomes as a basis for developing pedagogical knowledge and communication skills. This recommendation is an implication of the documentary findings and relevant literature, not an empirical finding about current teacher competence.

The national structure of the curriculum also creates an opportunity for consistency in curriculum design. A clearly articulated framework could establish common expectations while still allowing educators to use developmentally and culturally appropriate pedagogical approaches. Finally, the curriculum could be examined against established child-rights and violence-prevention principles, including the protection of children from abuse under the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the emphasis placed by WHO on school-based violence prevention (UNICEF, 1989; WHO, 2019).

3.4.4. Threats

The principal threats identified here are contextual rather than direct findings of the curriculum analysis. Research has documented challenges associated with discussing CSA and implementing prevention programs, including professional training needs and social sensitivities (Allen et al., 2020; Lu et al., 2022; Dolunay-Cug, 2022). Such factors may affect how curriculum content is interpreted and enacted, but their specific influence on TCMM implementation cannot be established from the present dataset. A second contextual concern is the possibility that a fragmented curriculum may place greater interpretive responsibility on educators. Where a national framework contains individual protective concepts without clearly connecting them, implementation may depend on how educators understand and integrate those concepts. Again, this is a plausible implication rather than an empirical finding about current practice.

4. Discussion

The TCMM exhibits a pedagogical silence through its null curriculum, where the omission of explicit, anatomically correct terminology creates a systemic barrier for teacher candidates attempting to facilitate protective action. The findings of this study underscore the potential of Türkiye's centralized TCMM ECE curriculum as a framework for addressing CSA prevention. However, critical gaps remain that challenge the curriculum's effectiveness. While the inclusion of themes such as bodily autonomy and personal boundaries aligns with global best practices (Wurtele, 2009; Kenny & Wurtele, 2016), these efforts are insufficiently integrated into a broader cultural and structural context that actively resists open discussions on CSA due to entrenched taboos and stigmas (Lu et al., 2022; Katzenstein & Fontes, 2017).

A notable strength of the TCMM lies in its nationwide applicability, which ensures consistent messaging and equal access to educational resources across diverse socio-economic contexts (MoNE, 2024b). However, the centralized approach's rigidity limits its adaptability to regional and cultural nuances, a shortcoming noted in other centralized systems (Feiger, 2024). The macrosystemic rigidity of Türkiye's centralized framework presents a unique professional dilemma: it provides unparalleled reach for child protection while simultaneously restricting the localized autonomy necessary for culturally responsive CSA prevention. This macrosystemic rigidity directly impacts the teacher's microsystem by forcing a state of 'barrier competency' failure. When the centralized macrosystem utilizes 'abstract moral language' instead of concrete safety terminology, it creates a null curriculum that leaves the individual teacher without the linguistic tools necessary to facilitate a disclosure. Consequently, the teacher, as the primary agent in the child's microsystem, is structurally inhibited from moving from 'moralizing' to 'acting,' effectively turning a systemic policy gap into an individual professional failure. Teachers, who play a pivotal role in delivering CSA prevention education, often lack adequate training and confidence to address sensitive topics (Allen et al., 2020; Dolunay-Cug, 2022), which may dilute the program's intended impact. Scholars (Brunborg et al., 2024; Wilson & Lee, 2021) found that ECE professionals with more years of experience were associated with lower barrier competencies, likely because experienced staff have dealt with more maltreatment cases and reporting processes. There is a critical deficit in barrier competencies among educators, requiring teacher preparation programs to move beyond abstract moralizing and toward the development of concrete, high-stakes communication expertise. It is suggested that experienced staff be encouraged to share their insights with less experienced colleagues (Brunborg et al., 2024) and that periodic training be provided for all teachers to help refresh and improve competencies. Additionally, the absence of explicit directives for parental involvement neglects a critical component of comprehensive CSA prevention, as parents are instrumental in reinforcing these concepts at home (Rudolph & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2018). Systemic issues compound these challenges. The absence of publicly available CSA statistics in Türkiye (Berkmen & Seçim, 2019) reflects a broader unwillingness to confront the problem comprehensively, fostering a reactive rather than proactive approach. Cultural resistance, rooted in patriarchal norms that silence victims and shield perpetrators, further undermines these efforts (Güler, 2022; Jones, 2024). Without addressing these systemic barriers, CSA prevention efforts risk being reduced to symbolic gestures, lacking the depth needed for meaningful societal change.

Although the curriculum emphasizes personal safety strategies for children, it insufficiently addresses broader systemic factors contributing to CSA's prevalence. This limited scope becomes even more apparent when compared with international practices. Internationally, several ECE systems adopt more explicit, structured approaches to CSA prevention. Australia's protective

behaviors curriculum (Sims et al., 2024; Walsh et al., 2013), for instance, teaches children practical strategies to recognize unsafe situations and seek help confidently. Similarly, Scandinavian ECE models prioritize children's exploration, curiosity, and respect for individuality (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2017; Lehn & Chahboun, 2025). In contrast, TCMM tends to rely on abstract or moral language, with limited direct references to abuse or protective action, which may hinder children's ability to internalize and act on these concepts. This omission aligns with critiques that preventive education often neglects the macro-level influences of power dynamics and cultural stigmas (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Zeuthen & Hagelskjær, 2013).

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

Survivors often report lacking the language, awareness, or confidence to disclose abuse when they were children, highlighting the critical role ECE can play in equipping young children with tools for self-protection. This study highlights both the potential and the limitations of Türkiye's centralized ECE curriculum in addressing CSA prevention. While the curriculum includes important elements, its implementation is hindered by systemic challenges. These findings echo with broader concerns about the effectiveness of school-based CSA prevention programs in contexts where cultural taboos and stigmas persist.

To overcome these challenges, it is essential to invest in comprehensive teacher training programs that build confidence and expertise, ensuring educators are equipped to handle sensitive topics effectively. Integrating parents into the prevention framework through structured workshops and resources can also help reinforce key concepts at home, creating a consistent and supportive environment for children. Beyond general policy reforms, which include the mandatory integration of CSA prevention as a core curriculum element, teacher educators in higher education settings can adopt specific pedagogical strategies to prepare the next generation of practitioners. We propose a transformative pedagogical model that empowers teacher candidates to act as active agents of protection by critically auditing national frameworks to identify and fill systemic safety gaps. To build barrier competencies, educators can facilitate role-playing exercises where candidates use the curriculum's specific body autonomy outcomes to practice responding to bad secrets or parent inquiries. This pedagogical practice allows candidates to bridge the theoretical gap by applying Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory as they analyze how they, as teachers in the microsystem, can bridge the critical gaps created by the macrosystem of centralized policy. Such an approach ensures that future teachers are not merely passive recipients of a centralized model but are active agents of child protection.

6. Declarations

6.1. Conflict of interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest to disclose.

6.2. Funding

The author declares that the study received no external funding.

6.3. Author contributions (CRediT)

Ceyda Durmus: Conceptualization; Methodology; Formal analysis; Investigation; Writing—original draft; Writing—review & editing

6.4. Data availability statement

This study involved only publicly available data: Ministry of National Education [MoNE]. (2024). *Early childhood education curriculum*. <https://tymm.meb.gov.tr/upload/program/2024programokuloncesiOnayli.pdf>

6.5. Ethics approval

The author declares that this study did not require ethics committee approval. The research was conducted in full accordance with applicable ethical standards and principles. This study involved only publicly available data (MoNE, 2024a).

6.6. Use of artificial intelligence (AI) tools

In accordance with COPE (Committee on Publication Ethics) core practices and the journal's guidelines, an AI tool (ChatGPT 4.0) was used during the final preparation of this manuscript. The tool's involvement was confined exclusively to basic linguistic refinement, structural formatting assistance, and grammatical optimization to enhance clarity. The generative model was not used to initiate original research, formulate conceptual deductions, analyze visual spreads, or synthesize qualitative findings. The author remains entirely accountable for the integrity, accuracy, and original analysis presented herein.

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