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Preschool leaders as enablers of innovation

Emerging practices of working with preschool leaders in Vietnam

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Introduction

Phuong is a teacher in a preschool in Nam Giang, a mountainous district in Quang Nam province in the central part of Vietnam. It is an area with many ethnic minorities. Children in this area experience many barriers to learning and participation at school. Twice a year, Phuong applies [process-oriented child monitoring](#) in her classroom. She observes signs of wellbeing and involvement in her learners. This enables her to assess their level of participation and learning. “Who is doing well? Who is at risk of not learning?” are just a few questions she asks herself.

Phuong identifies the main barriers to learning and participation experienced by the children in her class. She reflects about priority actions she can undertake to mitigate these barriers to learning. She thinks up and applies concrete changes in environment, materials, activities and interactions in her class. By doing so, she increases equity and care in her classroom.

Phuong learned these skills from a core group of trainers who train teachers like Phuong in process-oriented child monitoring. This core group consists of provincial and district level education officers, school leaders and teachers.



Phuong learning with other teachers

But what happens if the school leader does not approve of Phuong’s new approaches in the classroom? Or if the school leader wants the same activities and materials in all classes? What if the school leader is hesitant towards children learning through play? What if the school leader gets annoyed about a teacher taking initiative? What if Phuong experiences too little autonomy to initiate innovation? What if the school leader does not allow her to make mistakes?

While teachers are the most important factor contributing to learning outcomes, school leaders are key in creating the conditions for effective teaching and learning. They are gatekeepers to change.

Preschool education in Vietnam

Since 2009, Vietnam has stepped-up its consideration of preschool education and has established solid foundations in the provision of public preschools for 3-to-5-year-old children. Current participation rates are high with 89,56% of 5-year-old children participating in organised learning in 2016. However, a focus on equitable access alone does not guarantee the opportunity for all children to fulfil their potential. Inequality in developmental outcomes remains a concern.

Over the past two decades, the Vietnamese Government made significant investments in in-service teacher professional development at all levels of education. However, most of these trainings were theoretical rather than practical and attempted to reach large groups of teachers through a cascade approach. These efforts proved ineffective: teachers continue to experience difficulties in transferring and applying newly introduced methods to their daily practice. They struggle to fully understand or implement the official policy of child-centred education. They continue to use more traditional, teacher-centred activities in which ‘learning’ activities and ‘play’ activities are separated. Preschool teachers still have difficulties innovating their practices to cater to the diverse needs and address barriers experienced by those children at risk of not learning.

In this context, VVOB Vietnam works together with the provincial Departments of Education and Training of Quang Nam, Quang Ngai and Kon Tum provinces to mitigate preschool children’s barriers to learning in disadvantaged and ethnically diverse districts. The intervention improves the in-service teacher professional development of preschool teachers by building the capacity of VVOB’s government partners. The objective is to improve the quality of preschool education and support all children’s development to their rich and full potential.

Initiating professional reflection

The intervention introduces process-oriented child monitoring to preschool teachers. This approach starts with observing children’s levels of wellbeing and involvement as process indicators of learning, using a contextualised version of the Leuven scales for emotional wellbeing and involvement. This is followed by identifying social barriers to learning and participation. To address these barriers, teachers then identify action points which they can implement to improve wellbeing and involvement of all children. Maybe the teacher can rearrange her class and make the corners more attractive or enrich their content? By making sure materials are accessible and fun, more children will engage with them. The involvement of a child will likely rise when an activity meets the interest of that child. Teachers develop a reflective practice to better cater to the needs of all children and widen the scope of the learning opportunities offered to all.



Observing wellbeing and involvement

Process-oriented child monitoring hence becomes a catalyst for developing professional reflective practice. When teachers share their questions, evidence and thinking with each other and jointly reflect, they build collaborative expertise. Process-oriented child monitoring is embedded in the class and school context and creates an innovative school-based learning opportunity for teachers.

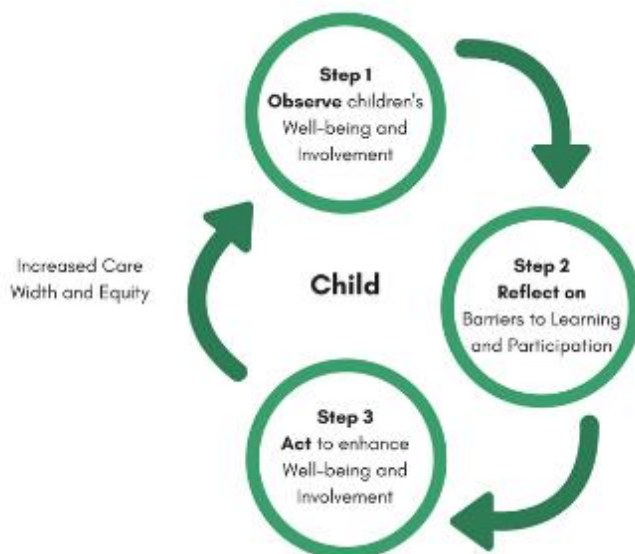


Figure 1 Process-oriented child monitoring

Enabling environment

The process described above needs encouragement and nurturing. School leaders are key in creating the conditions for effective teaching and learning. They can enhance a learning culture as well as develop systems that support teacher learning. This also applies to Vietnamese schools where hierarchy is a given and teachers are typically hesitant to deviate from their formally assigned roles.

School leadership in Vietnam

While Vietnamese preschool leaders experience less autonomy in terms of appointment of teachers, investments in teaching and learning materials and school facilities, they operate in a context where the importance of teacher professional development is recognised. Despite limited funding, systems are in place to organise both external and internal or school-based teacher professional development activities.

However, hierarchy and collectivism and the tendency to avoid 'losing face', are core values of Confucianism and remain deeply rooted in Vietnamese society, and hence also in school culture. A Vietnamese school leader must be capable of navigating between the authority of the education system on one side, while maintaining credibility as a leader in the eyes of teachers and the community on the other (Tran et.al., 2017; Truong et. al., 2016).

This creates a challenge for external partners to contribute to their effectiveness directly. Like teachers, school leaders are reluctant to deviate from their formally assigned tasks, which may limit their support to educational innovation and change.

Identifying an appropriate entry point

Working directly on school leadership as a driver of educational change, especially at the start of the intervention, has proven difficult. Therefore, VVOB's collaboration with Departments of Education and Training primarily focuses on school-based teacher professional development.

Education officers, with their core group, train teachers like Phuong in process-oriented child monitoring. Afterwards, these education officers visit schools and coach teachers on the practical implementation in the classroom. The education officers bring teachers together to jointly reflect on the teachers' classroom observations of learners and subsequent actions.

The intervention brings education officers and their core group together regularly to prepare the training on process-oriented child monitoring, to plan for the support visits to schools and to discuss the role they can take up during these visits.

While doing this, they also reflect on the effectiveness of their teacher professional development system as a whole. They consider questions as: "How can we improve the way we develop capacity with teachers?" "Does what we do lead to learning and change in the classroom?"

Based on their experiences from the support visits to schools and reflection on the effectiveness of the existing system, education officers have identified that school leaders are gatekeepers to educational change. Some school leaders do not give teachers enough autonomy to initiate innovations. As a result, teachers felt uncertain

to try out and make mistakes. The core group also noticed that schools with a culture of learning and collaboration are quicker in integrating innovations successfully. Starting from the multi-dimensional model of school leadership, VVOB and its partners looked at how school leaders can support teachers to reflect on and change their practices to better cater to the needs of all children.



Figure 2 School leaders as gatekeepers to change, finding an appropriate entry point for action

Emerging practices of working with preschool leaders

As a first step, education officers include school leaders in learning trajectories for teachers on improving the quality of education by reflecting on wellbeing and involvement of children. Participating in and promoting teacher learning and development is the leadership dimension that is most closely associated with positive student outcomes. School leaders who participate in learning trajectories for teachers, develop a deeper understanding of the conditions needed for staff to implement and sustain changes.

However, education officers soon realised that school leaders' participation was not enough. Although it leads to a better understanding of the educational change envisaged, it does not automatically lead to enhanced conditions for staff to try out and apply newly learned skills.

Education officers now include the concept of an enabling environment explicitly in their interventions as a second step. During training, that both teachers and school leaders attend, they support school leaders to plan how they will support their teachers.

For Phuong it has become easier to innovate her classroom practices as her school leader gives her the room and support she needs. Her school leader, in turn, is

supported by the education officers in her district and province to create this enabling environment. As the education officers engage in this process, their understanding grows, and next steps can be taken.

Conclusions

School leaders play a key role in leading professional learning in their schools. However, school leaders also depend on an enabling environment to learn and grow. As the education officers' understanding of the school leader's role towards teacher development grows, they reflect on their own role and take next steps towards facilitating school-based professional learning for preschool leaders and teachers.

The VVOB programme in Vietnam seeks to strengthen the education system towards creating an enabling environment. VVOB does this both at school level, via collaborative learning and school leaders who provide the most direct support to teachers, and at district and provincial level, where education officers in charge of preschool education can facilitate and guide school-based teacher professional development.

As school leaders and education officers jointly work with teachers on changing their practices and beliefs about education, their collaboration triggers broader system change towards quality education for all.



Catering to the needs of all children

Note: A previous version of this paper was presented at 19th UNESCO-APEID International Conference-Effective School Leadership for the 21st Century, 7-9/11/2018

Box 1:

VVOB – *education for development* strengthens education systems worldwide. Quality education is key to achieving a more equitable world for all.

VVOB Vietnam and the Ministry of Education of Vietnam have joined forces to improve the performance and effectiveness of preschool teachers in disadvantaged, ethnically diverse districts in three central provinces (Quang Nam, Quang Ngai and Kon Tum) in its **BaMi programme**. This early education programme (2017-2021) is financed by Belgium.

Recently, VVOB Vietnam started the implementation of a European Union co-funded programme (2018-2021) on gender-responsive play-based learning in early childhood education (GENTLE).

Box 2:

VVOB programmes globally use a model of 8 dimensions of leadership affecting student outcomes, developed from research as a starting point (Figure 2). Depending on the country's experience, challenges and needs, this model is adjusted, acknowledging a diverse set of national contexts. This means assessing the context and identifying who exactly needs support to improve school leadership. Local education partners – ministries of education and institutions that are responsible for the professional development of school leaders – may need support to empower school leaders to improve the quality of education. Professional development providers may need assistance from experts.



Figure 3 Dimensions of successful school leadership (National College for Leadership of Schools and Children's Services, 2010)

VVOB (2017). *Putting SDG4 into practice. School leadership*. [VVOB Technical Brief No1](#). Brussels: VVOB.

Links (to other relevant websites or resources for further reading):

- <https://vietnam.vvob.be/>
- www.vvob.org
- <http://www.child-encyclopedia.com/sites/default/files/dossiers-complets/en/child-care-early-childhood-education-and-care.pdf#page=52>
- BaMi programme (Mitigating Preschool Children's Barriers to Learning in Disadvantaged and Ethnically Diverse Districts)
 - <https://www.vvob.be/en/programmes/vietnam-bami>
- VVOB (2017). Putting SDG4 into practice. School leadership. VVOB Technical Brief No1. Brussels: VVOB.
<https://www.vvob.be/en/downloads/technical-brief-1-school-leadership>

Media:

- What is process-oriented child monitoring?
 - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HI0_VrqWzvQ
- From Observation to Action! Process-oriented child monitoring:
 - <https://youtu.be/vV6u4H7Js44>
- Improve quality education in Vietnamese preschools with VVOB:
 - <https://youtu.be/P-CDCXEh8Vk>
- For more videos, please visit our Youtube channel:
 - <https://www.youtube.com/user/VVOBVietnam>

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