

Growing up in cities: empowering early childhood services in Da Nang, Viet Nam to deal with urban barriers to learning

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Introduction

The world is changing fast and with it, the context in which children grow up, learn, and develop. Education systems must adapt; however, they are challenged by the rapid pace of change. One of the often underestimated but very present challenges in development today is the fast-urban growth and quality of life in cities (Beall et al., 2010). The United Nations New Urban Agenda (2017) recognises the key importance of urban planning, agile local government institutions, and quality education.

Da Nang is a typical example of such a fast-expanding city (Ostojic, Dejan, Bose, Krambecj, Lim & Zhang, 2013). The Da Nang city services are working to ensure that the full potential of urban development benefits all citizens – including many newcomers from rural provinces. However, urban growth can soon put pressure on the educational system: it can exhaust the capacity of public schools and contribute to increasing urban stress.

This paper shares the approach and initial outcomes⁹ of the “Communities of Practice Inspiring Teaching Innovations in the Early Education System in Vietnam” project (CITIES). It includes approaches that VVOB, a non-profit organisation working on education for development, and its partner, the Da Nang

Department of Education and Training (DOET), are applying to improve the quality of preschool education in public and private preschools in a fast-growing city (VVOB, 2019). The paper explores how the education system can adjust its access, services, and the pedagogical approach to help children cope with the changing urban environment. The classroom, in this paper, is considered the place where many of the interlinked societal evolutions that impact children come together.

Background information

The project, which runs from June 2019 until February 2021, focuses on the Son Tra District, Da Nang City, Viet Nam. Son Tra is an industrial port district with many seasonal and migrant workers. Due to the fast increasing population, and the limited capacity of public services, the number of private preschools and home-based groups have grown drastically, currently standing at 15 and 137 respectively, with lower qualification levels for teachers in private schools than in public schools (Son Tra Bureau of Training and Education, 2019).

The direct beneficiaries of the project are the teachers and school leaders of eight pilot preschools (6 public, 2 non-public) and the government officials of the Da Nang DOET and Bureau of Education and Training (BOET) (Figure 1). In the preschools, the project focuses on the 3 to 5-year old children.

⁹ At the time of writing this paper the project is in its sixth month (November 2019).

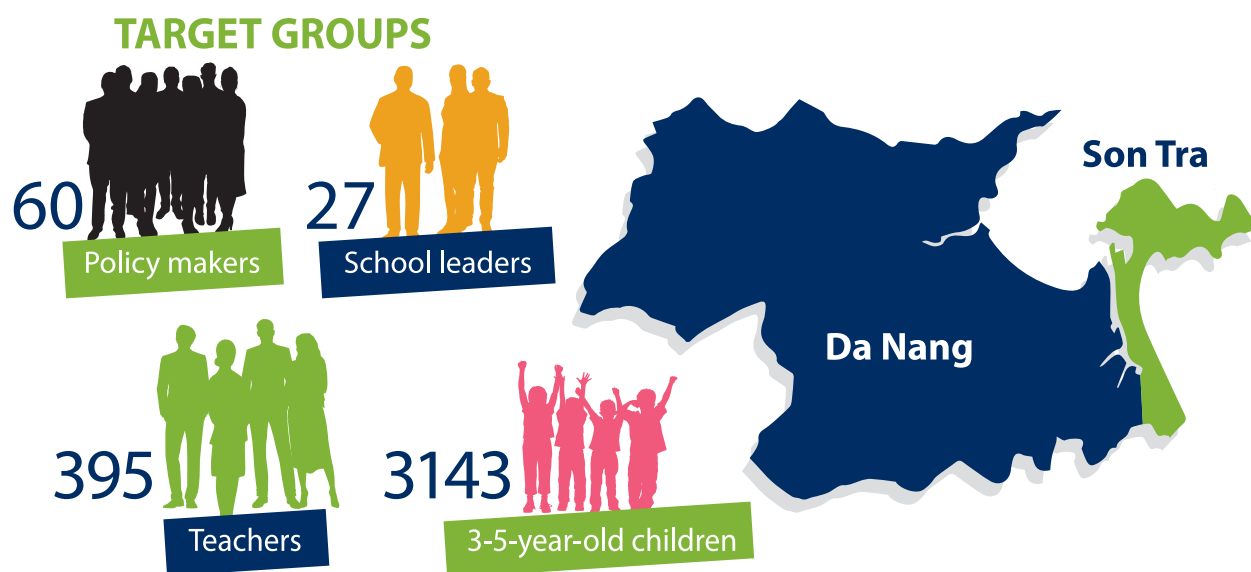


Figure 1: Infographic CITIES project

Methods

In one year, the project seeks to identify key barriers to learning that are typical for vulnerable boys and girls in an urban context as well as identify and implement innovative ways of mitigating some barriers.

The project assists Da Nang preschools to apply the Process-Oriented Child Monitoring methodology (Laevers, Moons & Declercq, 2012) to assess the well-being and involvement of preschool children as a proxy for learning and participation (Box 1, Figure 2). Based on the results, teachers implement a more differentiated pedagogical approach to preschool pupils experiencing barriers to learning.

Furthermore, a group of international and national artists expose participants to and let them try out applied artistic practices and interactive theatre methods (see Table 2) to build socio-emotional skills and resilience in children that grow up in an urban context. Although a city creates challenges, it also offers opportunities for learning (André, 2012; Bernard Van Leer Foundation, 2019).

In a second phase, this project explores how the availability of arts and real-life learning opportunities in the city (such as storytelling murals, design for play in public space, storytelling in the park) can be an educational asset to overcome barriers.

The capacity development of teachers, school leaders, and education officers consists of a modular training approach, complemented by on-site coaching, collaborative learning, and study visits.

The process is documented and analysed, creating a body of knowledge on urban barriers in the education context. The project gathers academic and government experts to support and learn from these findings. It is intended that a community of education practitioners explores the concept of urban barriers to learning, exchange ways of mitigating these barriers, and provide policy advice. The project aims to organise an exchange between representatives of the DOET from different cities in Viet Nam to disseminate experiences and create momentum for replication in other cities.

BOX 1

Process-oriented child monitoring

Process-oriented child monitoring methodology (Laevers et al., 2012) is an experiential education method which helps teachers to observe the (1) level of well-being and (2) involvement of children, identify (3) barriers to learning and (4) participation, and taking action to mitigate these barriers and to ensure deep learning of all children.

1 Children who are in a state of well-being feel like a 'fish in water'. They radiate vitality and inner peace. They are spontaneous and comfortable. They show

self-confidence and self-esteem. They are receptive to their environment.

2 Children with a high level of involvement are highly focused and absorbed by their activity. They show interest, motivation, and deep satisfaction. There is an intense mental activity. They operate at the limits of their capabilities.

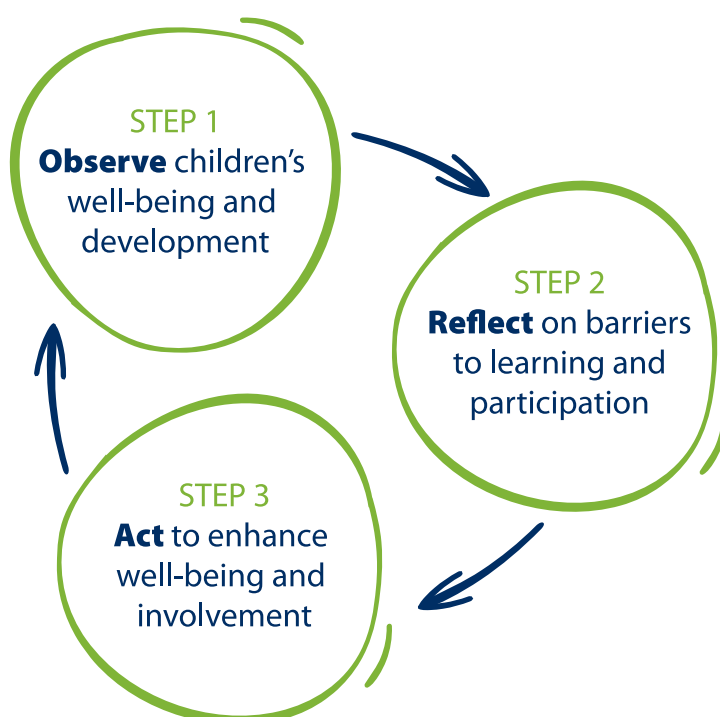
3 Once teachers have monitored children's levels of well-being and involvement, they identify which children are doing well and which are at risk of not learning.

The teachers reflect on barriers to learning and participation (Booth, 2016) experienced by children at risk.

4 Based on the reflection, teachers prioritise changes in:

- the physical space of the learning environment and the corners;
- the materials used in classroom corners and activities;
- the activities (learning activities, play activities, outdoor, free play); and
- interactions (1) among teachers and the children, (2) among children.

Figure 2: The process-oriented child monitoring approach



Results

Through the varied capacity development methods (modular training, complemented by on-site coaching, collaborative learning, and study visits), teachers, school leaders, officials of Da Nang DOET and Son Tra BOET improved their skills of observing children's well-being and involvement, and analysing barriers to learning and participation.

It was difficult for the target group to look for barriers beyond the classroom and see the link between the urban circumstances the children live in and their learning and participation in the classroom. The project then built awareness and understanding of urban challenges. Participants identified educational barriers (such as limited and unattractive materials, inappropriate didactics,

etc.) and urban barriers to learning (such as too much screen time for children, lack of parental time) [Table 1].

The planned additional data collection, both qualitative data from focus group discussions with teachers, school leaders, and parents, and quantitative data from questionnaires to be completed by teachers and school leaders mapping both the impact and frequency of the perceived barriers, will complement these findings.

From the barrier analysis, participants applied eight possible action points, initiating changes in the learning environment, activities, materials, and interactions (Table 2). On-site coaching helped them to deepen their understanding and improve implementation.

TABLE 1 Educational and urban barriers

Educational barriers	Urban barriers
- Limited and unattractive learning materials - Inappropriate didactics - Teacher/children ratio - Limited parent-teacher contacts - Pressure from parents on teachers, children	- Too much screen time - Lack of parental time - Changes in social cohesion - Limited access to green spaces

TABLE 2 Eight possible action points

1	Rearrange the classroom in appealing corners or areas	5	Support ongoing activities with stimulating impulses and enriching interventions
2	Check corners to replace unattractive materials with more appealing ones	6	Widen possibilities for free initiative, support them with sound rules and agreements
3	Introduce new and unconventional materials and activities	7	Explore and improve the relationship with each child and between children
4	Discover children's interests and find related activities	8	Introduce activities that help children to explore the world of behaviour, feelings, and values

Changing the activities (Hoang Yen Preschool, Da Nang, January 2020)/© Nguyen DK Duy



Change in the learning environment, activities, and materials (Hoi An, March 2020)/© Nguyen TT Trang



The visits also stimulated the teachers' confidence and openness to reflect on and discuss their teaching practice. The collaborative learning via group work, sharing and exchanging experiences and results, and discussions, stimulated learning with and from each other. Study visits exposed them to new ideas and concrete examples of how to implement action points and innovative methods.

Participants indicated how this approach supports the implementation of directives on child-centred approach and daily child-assessment as requested by the Viet Nam Ministry of Education and Training (Socialist Republic of Viet Nam, 2017; 2017; 2018; 2019).

So far, these findings are in line with what VVOB and DOET experienced in a similar programme in rural provinces such as Quang Nam, Quang Ngai, and Kon Tum.

Challenges

The project found that participants were generally unaware of urban barriers and their potential effect on the holistic development of children. In addition to this, the project identified some additional and unexpected challenges.

Firstly, the interactions with the target group were different than in the above-mentioned similar project in three central provinces of Viet Nam. School leaders and teachers were more hesitant to share opinions, ask questions, and interact. The project adjusted its facilitation methods accordingly, providing more individual and smaller group interaction prior to bigger group activities. Coaching visits stimulated the confidence of participants. This observation will influence the project's approach towards the sharing and exchange activities planned further in the project.

Secondly, the start-up phase of the project revealed a difference between the teaching staff in private schools as compared to public

schools. Private schools see a higher turnover of teachers and lower levels of teacher professional development. While this already brings clear challenges for the quality of education offered, private schools also seem to have less time for in-service training and participation in the project.

Next steps

The next step will be exposure to an experimental innovative method. This will be facilitated by a joint group of international and national artists. The workshop will help participants to be exposed to and try out applied artistic practices and interactive theatre methods to build socio-emotional skills and resilience in children that grow up in an urban context. The innovative workshop will be followed by an analytical workshop where participants will analyse how the innovative method fits in the Vietnamese education context and policy as well as how it affects well-being and involvement of children.

This will be further complemented with the above-mentioned additional data collection, quantitative and qualitative, describing the preschool child in the urban context. This information will be linked to existing research on urbanisation (desk study).

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The challenge of sustainable urban development is increasingly being recognised as a key development challenge, although only a limited number of organisations have dedicated programmes in place. The national government of Viet Nam has engaged in earlier World Bank projects to address urban expansion. Additionally, at the start of the school year 2018-2019 the Vietnamese prime minister called for dedicated attention to the quality of schooling for children in industrial zones, thus creating an ideal policy base and

political buy-in from the highest level – important in a centralised country like Viet Nam (Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 2018). Da Nang, often considered Vietnam's third city, was the second Vietnamese city to participate in the Child-Friendly Cities Initiative in 2019 (Weedy, 2019; United Nations Children's Fund, 2004; 2018).

There is a high level of commitment to and appreciation for this project from all levels in the education system, from the Ministerial level, city authorities in Da Nang, to the school level. So far, very few initiatives target education in an urban context. Despite the commitment, the project reveals a general lack of awareness on how growing up in a city can affect the learning and participation of pre-school children and on what role a school can play in mitigating the barriers.

This small-scale intervention creates awareness and builds capacity in adjusting practices. It also led participants to see implementation opportunities for the

early childhood education curriculum and directives by the Ministry of Education and Training. The planned exposure to experimental innovative methods will help participants to specifically address urban barriers to learning and participation.

Due to the limited capacity of public services, the presence of private schools catering to the disadvantaged is a specific urban reality. Guaranteeing the quality of education for all children is a responsibility of the DOET and BOET. These initial lessons are very relevant for the learning trajectory of the government officials DOET and BOET, i.e. "what role can they play?" and will be further analysed and discussed throughout the pilot year.

Parallel with the continuation of capacity development, the project continues to collect data and information from literature, Da Nang DOET, Son Tra BOET, teachers, school leaders, and parents. The project will, thus, contribute substantially to the currently limited body of knowledge on the potential effect of cities



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on the holistic development of children. Learnings will be collected in high-quality dissemination materials in video and print.

Growing up in a city offers tremendous potential for a child. Cities, however, also create specific barriers to learning and participation that carry the risk of increasing inequalities and affecting the most disadvantaged much more strongly. The project accompanies key actors in the education system to find the opportunities of urban living to tackle the urban barriers to learning. While it is not without its challenges, this approach is already uncovering its potential added value.

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