

Chapter 31

Vietnam Early Childhood Education

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Abstract Change and confusion are the words best describe Vietnamese early childhood education (ECE) at the present. In the last two decades, Vietnam initiated two attempts to reform ECE curriculum and pedagogy national wide. In essence, the reforms are a paradigm shift from teacher-centered to child-centered pedagogy and from a fragmented and subject-based to a holistic integrated curriculum. The latter approach to ECE is customary in the West, but, for Vietnamese ECE professionals, the shift is radical as the child-centered and holistic philosophy contests their centuries-shaped Confucian beliefs about teaching and learning. Thus, in this section on Vietnam, I will show how the reforms have been posing great challenges in understanding and enacting the new ECE approach, causing confusion and disagreement among ECE stakeholders. I also speculate possible roots of the problem and discuss the consequences that the problematic understanding of the new ECE approach might bring about. To facilitate understanding of the challenges Vietnamese ECE is facing with, I first analyze problems of the country's established ECE provision.

Keywords Early childhood education • Educational change • Vietnam

31.1 The ECE Heritage

In Vietnam, ECE cares and educates children from 6 months to 6 years of age. Despite the turbulent historical developments in the second half of the twentieth century, Vietnamese ECE has observed relatively fast expansion compared to other equally economically disadvantaged countries (Dinh 2008; Hamano and Ochanomizu University 2010). At present in Vietnam, there are approximately 12,000 kindergartens with more than 3 million children. Education for under 6 is not compulsory in Vietnam, but the demand is always much higher than available places (Department of Early Childhood Education 2006). ECE has long been a part

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of the Vietnamese educational system under Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) management, which highlights Vietnam's focus on the educational aspect of ECE provision. Vietnam have had a comprehensive national ECE curriculum, an ECE research center, and a journal in ECE for decades. Meanwhile, ECE teacher preparation progressed from a 2-month course in the 1960s to a 2-year course then 3-year diploma in the 1970s. The first 4-year university degree was offered in 1985 (Department of Early Childhood Education 2006). Since then, almost all normal universities in Vietnam offer 4-year bachelor degrees in early childhood education. The growth of ECE provision in the tough years can be explained by Communism's tenet "Giving the best to young children," the Vietnamese government's strong commitment to developing extensive public ECE services with equal access for everyone, high birth rate, and the fact that the majority of Vietnamese women were working outside the home (Dinh 2008; Hamano and Ochanomizu University 2010).

One of the most prominent characteristics of Vietnamese conventional ECE practice is the uniform curriculum and pedagogy. All state and private ECE settings in Vietnam have been required to follow a unitary national curriculum for decades. Until 1998, Program of Care and Education for ECE Children, to be referred to here below as the Old Program, written in the early 1980s, was the national curriculum and the only ECE model in Vietnam. The Old Program had a top-down curriculum approach: number of lessons, their content and didactics, and detailed guidelines and instructions were predetermined on a day-to-day basis for each age group in all kindergartens across Vietnam. What teachers and children were expected to do was to follow the clearly set-out agenda (Ministry of Education 1986). The Old Program was also very much like a school subject-based curriculum where each lesson was scheduled to focus on one of its seven learning areas, for example, Language Development, Maths, or Arts. With reference to the Old Program's pedagogy, learning was highly teacher directed: the majority of the time, teachers explained, gave instructions, and showed examples, and the children executed the tasks. There was an excessive emphasis on what to learn over how to learn (MOET 2002b).

The Old Program's goals were defined as fostering children's all-round development in five domains: physical, cognitive, moral, aesthetic, and work ethics. However, the problem was that in reality, classrooms under the Old Program paid overwhelming attention to the cognitive aspect of child development, while the other four domains were underemphasized (MOET 2002b). Even in the single cognitive aspect, there was always a heavy focus on quantity of knowledge and skills rather than fostering children's independent and creative thinking. ECE teachers also paid overwhelming attention to lessons, while other kinds of activities were overshadowed (Phan 2005). With regard to assessment, under the Old Program practice, teaching and learning were frequently monitored by kindergartens' principals and inspectors from local Department of Early Childhood Education. The assessment was rigid and controlled both content and teaching procedure to detail (MOET 2002b). For decades the educational approach represented by the Old Program had been seen by Vietnamese ECE professionals as highly appropriate and effective. It is understandable, given the fact that Vietnam mostly had close academic ties with Eastern European countries, particularly the Soviet Union,

which at that time shared a similar sociopolitical background and educational philosophy (Dinh 2008).

It needs to note that Vietnamese parents also strongly contribute to the established ECE practice. Vietnamese parents take a generally indulgent attitude toward children, excessively pampering and overprotecting them (Huynh n.d.; Tran 2006). Thus, young children seem to have limited opportunities for trials and error, to experiment with their own abilities, take risks, or get to know the real world. There are limited chances for children to learn to be independent and responsible for themselves, both in learning and in life. Also, Vietnamese parents' deeply rooted respect for education (Ashwill and Thai 2005) seems to be a stimulating and, at the same time, constraining factor for education. In a society where respect and social status is gained through education, paramount focus is on academic achievements. Parents consider helping children learn to read, write, and calculate as one of the most important characteristics of "good" kindergartens. Meanwhile, essential requirements for working and living in the twenty-first century such as communication skills, life skills, social-emotional development, thinking critically, and problem solving have generally been overlooked for the sake of "what to learn."

Most of the cases of education innovation are driven by professional initiatives or attempts to rectify professional problems (Fullan 2005; Hargreaves 2005). In the contrast, the recent ECE curriculum and pedagogical reforms in Vietnam were brought about by enormous socioeconomic shifts in Vietnam after the issuing of doi moi (innovation) policy by the government in 1986. Changes in the economy highlighted weak competitiveness of the country's labor force and educational reforms are seen "as an integral part of national development" (Hiroshiro and Kitamura 2009, p. 1). The ECE curriculum and pedagogical reforms, discussed below, were born within the imperative to improve education quality. Meanwhile, it seems that democratization of Vietnam's politics and social life after doi moi (Wells-Dang 2006) created more openness toward critical thinking and questioning the existing ECE model. It was then recognized by ECE professionals in Vietnam that the unitary and top-down approach to curriculum delivery offered ECE teachers little room for flexibility, initiative, and decisionmaking to best promote children's learning in Vietnam's diverse contexts (Nguyen 2009).

31.2 ECE Paradigm Shift and Challenges

C. L. V. Le (2009a) notes that MOET has brought the "cautious, gradual, step-by-step approach," believed to be successful for Vietnam's economic reforms, to educational reforms. ECE reforms are no exception, with two versions of the New Program being gradually developed and piloted over the last decade. The first attempt of ECE curriculum and pedagogy reform was initiated in 1998 with the introduction of the first version of a new national ECE program. In 2005, the second version of the program was piloted, portraying a more radical shift toward child-centered education. Based on the positive assessment of the piloted results by the

program developers (Le 2009b), in July 2009, the program was officially legislated as the new national ECE program in Vietnam (Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) 2009). ECE in Vietnam is uniform and under supervision of MOET; thus, the new program is expected to be implemented across the country.

It is undeniable that the reforms have brought about positive changes in pre-school classrooms. ECE teachers now have a greater degree in curriculum decision-making as compared to the previous curriculum with predetermined and detailed instructions regarding teaching content and didactics. Classroom atmosphere became more informal and friendly as compared to traditional practice. Research evidence (Phan 2005) indicates that Vietnamese ECE teachers met the reforms with enthusiasm. This is in contrast to the widely perceived “lack of uptake” of active learning and learner-centered methods by Asian teachers (Lewis and McCook 2002) and “resistance to change” for the fear of new things (Fink and Stoll 2005). The teachers are enthusiastic because they feel that the new ECE approach unbounds (though not fully) them from the traditional rigid teaching procedures and creates opportunities to make learning experience more exciting for young children (Nguyen 2009; Phan 2005).

However, evidence (Le 2009c; Phan 2005) indicates that even after 10 long years of carrying out ECE reforms, the holistic child-centered educational philosophy continues to cause great challenges for all ECE stakeholders: classroom teachers, ECE managers, and ECE teacher educators. The central problem is that the ECE professionals have been experiencing difficulty in conceptualizing how the new ECE approach should be understood and implemented. In an interview response, an ECE expert concerns about extreme versions of understanding of the new ECE philosophy by ECE stakeholders: “Well, if flexible is too flexible, if rigid is too rigid. The nature of the ECE reforms is still poorly understood” (2012, p. 162). This situation leads to a sharp disagreement between ECE stakeholders in defining the new ECE philosophy. Vietnamese ECE professionals themselves admit: “Of course there have been speakers, workshops, training about the new [ECE] program... we listened over and over... but cannot reach a consensus yet” (Phan 2012, p. 162).

Vietnamese ECE educators recognize that the difference in perspective and practice is not something like “quality in diversity” or creative translation of the new ECE approach into practice. Rather, the divergence associates with confusion and vagueness in understanding the new ECE program. An ECE teacher educator claims: “To be honest, there is still no consensus on the understanding of the new program and no sound grasp of it” (Phan 2012, p. 162). As a result, the reform intentions have not been fully and sometimes mistakenly translated into classroom practice. A study into implementation of the new ECE program shows that because of the problematic understanding of the new ECE approach, it is highly likely that the new ECE philosophy remains more cliché than practice (Phan 2005). Detailed discussion of the difference in understanding the new ECE approach and making judgments of them is beyond the focus of this section. Here below I emphasize that the problematic professional conceptualization and implementation of the new ECE program is the result of a combination of professional and contextual factors.

31.3 The Deep Roots of Challenges

First, MOET's unsatisfactory way of enacting reform, including the inadequate articulation of the new ECE approach, is largely blamed by ECE professionals for causing the difficulties in conceptualizing the new ECE philosophy. Vague and general expressions of new ECE principles in the new program documents are seen as a prominent contributor to poor understanding and implementation of the new program in practice (Le 2009a; Phan 2005). In addition, MOET's application of an educational model taken from other cultures seems to be positivist and straightforward. There is no clarification of cultural differences between the old and new ECE principles in the new program guidelines (MOET 2002a). Consecutive introductions of two versions of the new ECE program in 10 years (and continuous amendments to the two versions each year over that time) add weight to the confusion Vietnamese ECE teachers are experiencing. Many ECE professionals see the second version is a complete replacement of the previous one: They seem to experience difficulties in reading the change and continuity between two versions of the new ECE program. This misunderstanding has led to uncertainty and frustration about the changes: "That is we don't give high credit to the ECE reforms. We think that... sometimes it seems that they [the reforms] haven't been done in a sound and scientific way," a teacher educator responds (Phan 2012, p. 167). This is aligned with Stones's (1983) explanation as to the reasons for the gap between teachers' beliefs and their practice: misinterpretation of theory or faulty implementation of the theory or inadequacy of the theory itself. In this case, of Vietnamese ECE educational reforms, misinterpretation of theory seems to have led to described above unsatisfactory implementation of the theory and doubt in the rightness of the theory.

Second, there is evidence that the burden from previous educational beliefs contributes to the vague understanding of the new ECE philosophy. For instance, the habitual transmissive style of teaching, the preoccupation with subject knowledge, and the sacrifice of "how to learn" for the sake of learning outcomes seem to prevent ECE professionals from understanding active learning (Le 2009b; Phan 2005). The long practice of carrying out detailed teaching plans, ready-made by MOET, seems to make many ECE teachers struggle to create their own teaching agenda (Nguyen 2009; Phan 2005). Similarly, the studies show that accustomed to a subject-based curriculum, ECE teachers are struggling to understand an integrated curriculum, making tenuous and illogical links in attempts to integrate the key learning areas. The long-lasting isolation of Vietnamese ECE from the international landscape seems to also contribute to ECTE's difficulties in conceptualization.

Thirdly, there is evidence that the most prominent reason is culture related. The shift in ECE philosophy is enormous as the "old" ECE practice is the outcome of the combination of thousands of years of Confucian beliefs about teaching and learning and the Soviet model with communist ethos in education. Meanwhile, the "new" ECE practice that the reforms aimed for is taken from a very different cultural context: the Western modern of ECE. Thus, the changes exemplify not only the shift in professional beliefs and practice about ECE but also a shift in the deeply

rooted culturally shaped beliefs about teaching and learning and the image about the child. Studies into the implementation of the new ECE program (Le 2009c; Phan 2005) show that the child-centered philosophy greatly challenges Vietnamese ECE teachers' deeply rooted Confucian beliefs about adult superiority, teacher authority, and child submission. This is very much in line with findings from studies into similar educational shift at upper school levels in Vietnam (Sullivan 2000) and other Confucian heritage countries (Cheng 2001; Lee and Tseng 2008).

Last but not least, there is no doubt that ECE teachers' inadequate professionalism contributes to the problematic understanding of the ECE reforms (National Teacher Training College in Ho Chi Minh City 2009). Recent research (National Teacher Training College in Ho Chi Minh City 2009; Phan 2012) shows that Vietnamese teacher preparation fails to meet the demands of the new ECE practice. There is a significant gap between what teacher training offers and what changing ECE practice needs, between the unchanged ECTE and the fast-moving ECE practice. Firstly, ECTE's conventional curriculum is too much (overloaded and excessive, with mastery sacrificed for the sake of coverage) but, at the same time, too little (not covering all essential knowledge, dispositions, and skills) to effectively cater to the new ECE practice. Secondly, ECTE's long-standing teacher-centered pedagogy fails to empower prospective teachers with the essential capacities (self-directed, effective, and independent curriculum decisionmaking and critical reflection on teaching) to successfully work with the new ECE approach (Phan 2012). Thus, the current ECTE, including training curriculum and pedagogy, fails to empower graduates to work with the new ECE practice.

At the present time, the standard qualification required to work with preschool-aged children is a 2-year college diploma. However, since the 2000s, 2-year courses have gradually been reduced, and ECTE courses now tend to be either 3-year diplomas or 4-year university degrees. The scope of ECE teacher training has also been expanding since *doi moi* due to increased recognition of the importance of ECE teacher preparation (Department of Early Childhood Education 2006) and MOET's higher education expansion policy (Hayden and Lam 2010). As a result, the number of ECE teachers with standard qualifications has significantly increased during the last 5 years: 60% for nursery and 83% for kindergartens in 2004 and 92% in total in 2008 (MOET 2010). However, for the mentioned reasons, MOET is concerned that ECE teachers' true expertise is relatively lower than the degrees they possess (Department of Early Childhood Education 2006).

In conclusion, the current situation in Vietnamese ECE reforms speaks to several issues: the importance of proper articulation of reform intention and purpose and the importance of taking into account cultural aspect of education. This case of Vietnamese ECE reform asks educators to be cautious in bringing borrow-from-outside educational model to local context. The Vietnamese ECE reforms also highlight the need to align teacher education with ECE development.

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