



Preschool Leaders as Enablers of Innovation: Emerging practices with preschool leaders in Vietnam

Lieve Leroy & Thi Chau Nguyen

To cite this article: Lieve Leroy & Thi Chau Nguyen (2019) Preschool Leaders as Enablers of Innovation: Emerging practices with preschool leaders in Vietnam, *Childhood Education*, 95:2, 3-12, DOI: [10.1080/00094056.2019.1593753](https://doi.org/10.1080/00094056.2019.1593753)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00094056.2019.1593753>



Published online: 22 Mar 2019.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Preschool Leaders as Enablers of Innovation

Emerging practices with
preschool leaders in Vietnam

Lieve Leroy and
Thi Chau Nguyen
VVOB

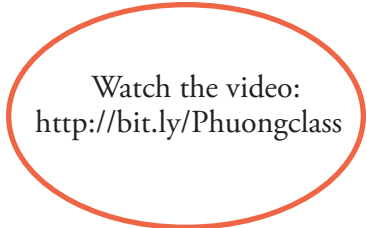


Context has a significant impact on the relative success of efforts to innovate in the classroom.

Thus, it is important to understand the role of school leaders as both gatekeepers and facilitators within their specific context.

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, and 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 (watch the video; see media link below). She observes signs of well-being and involvement in her learners, assessing their level of participation and learning. She asks herself, “Who is doing well?” and “Who is at risk of not learning?”

After identifying the main barriers to learning and participation experienced by the children in her class, Phuong considers what priority actions she can take to mitigate those barriers. She develops and applies concrete changes to the environment, materials, activities, and interactions. 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 includes provincial and district level education officers, school leaders, and teachers.



Watch the video:
<http://bit.ly/Phuongclass>

A previous version of this article was presented at the 19th UNESCO-APEID International Conference-Effective School Leadership for the 21st Century, 7-9 November 2018.

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 about children learning through play? What if the school leader gets annoyed about a teacher taking initiative? What if Phuong does not possess enough 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; 89.56% of 5-year-old children participated in organized learning in 2016. However, a focus on equitable access alone does not guarantee the opportunity for all children to fulfill 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 when transferring and applying newly introduced methods to

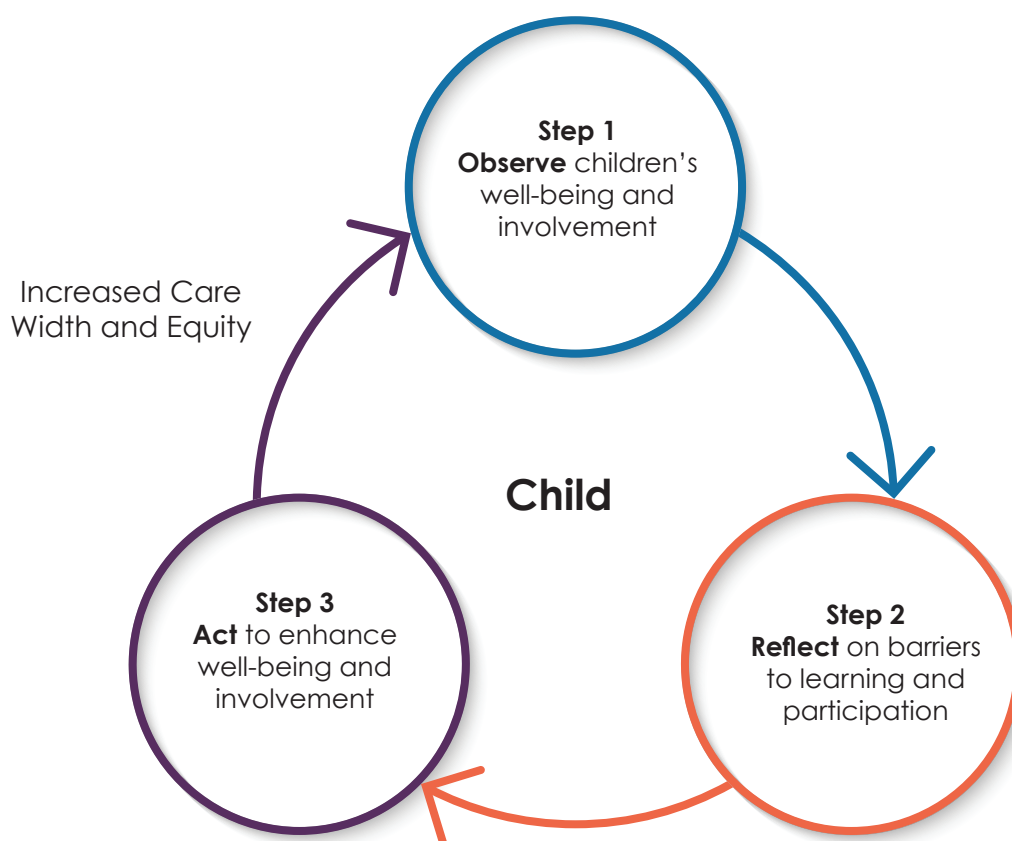


Figure 1. Process-oriented child monitoring

their daily practice. They struggle to fully understand or implement the official policy of child-centred education. They continue to use more traditional, teacher-centered activities that separate “learning” and “play.” They still have difficulty innovating their practices to cater to diverse needs and address barriers experienced by 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 in-service 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 (Figure 1) to preschool teachers. This approach starts with observing children’s levels of well-being and involvement as process indicators of learning, using a contextualized version of the Leuven scales for emotional well-being and involvement. This is followed by identification of social barriers to learning and participation. To address these barriers, teachers then select action points they can implement to improve the well-being 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 increase when an activity meets that child's interest. As teachers develop a reflective practice to better meet the needs of all children, they widen the scope of learning opportunities.

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.

The process described above needs encouragement and nurturing. School leaders are key to 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 teacher appointment, investments in teaching, and learning materials and school facilities, they do operate in a context that recognizes the importance of teacher professional development. Despite limited funding, systems are in place to organize both external and internal or school-based teacher professional development activities.

However, hierarchy, collectivism, and the tendency to avoid “losing face” are core values of Confucianism and remain deeply rooted in Vietnamese society, including school culture. A Vietnamese school leader must be capable of navigating the authority of the education system, maintaining credibility as a leader in the eyes of teachers and of the community.

This creates a challenge for external partners to contribute to their effectiveness directly. Like

**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) through its BaMi program. This early education program (2017-21) is financed by Belgium.

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

teachers, school leaders are reluctant to deviate from their formally assigned tasks, which may limit their support for education innovation and change.

Identifying an Appropriate Entry Point

Working directly on school leadership as a driver of education 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. Afterward, these education officers visit schools and coach teachers on practical implementation in the classroom. The education officers bring teachers together to jointly reflect on the teachers' classroom observations of learners and subsequent actions.

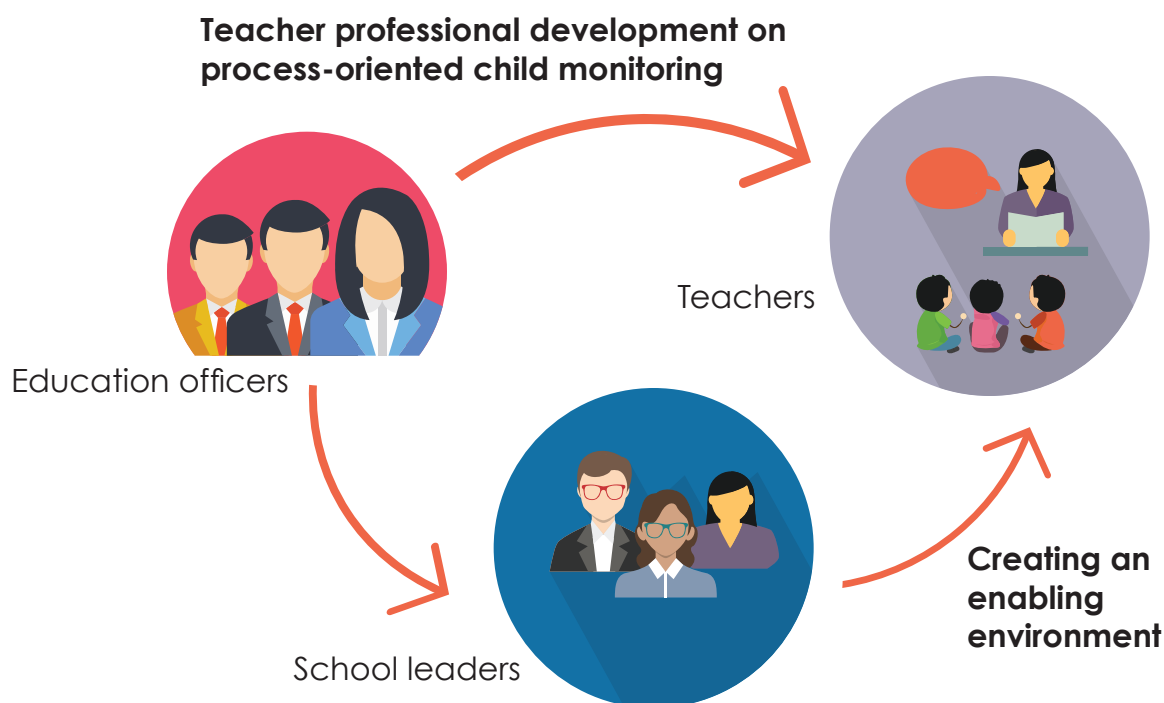


Figure 2. School leaders as gatekeepers to change, finding an appropriate entry point for action

The education officers meet regularly with their core group to prepare the training on process-oriented child monitoring, plan for the support visits to schools, and discuss the role they can take during these visits. While doing this, they also reflect on the effectiveness of their teacher professional development system as a whole. They consider questions such as: “How can we improve the way we develop capacity with teachers?” and “Does what we do lead to learning and change in the classroom?”

Based on their experiences during support visits to schools and reflection on the effectiveness of the existing system, education officers have identified school leaders as gatekeepers to education change. Some of these school leaders do not give teachers enough autonomy to initiate innovations. As a result, teachers are not confident about trying out new techniques and potentially making mistakes. The core group also noticed that schools with a culture

of learning and collaboration are quicker to integrate 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 meet the needs of all children (Figure 2).

Emerging Practices of Working With Preschool Leaders

As a first step, education officers include school leaders in teachers’ learning trajectories for improving the quality of education by reflecting on children’s well-being and involvement. 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



Adele Dachy

Catering to the needs of all children



Adele Dachy

Phuong learning with other teachers



VVOB programs globally use a model of eight dimensions of leadership affecting student outcomes, developed from research as a starting point. 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 (source: National College for Leadership of Schools and Children's Services, 2010)

understanding of the conditions needed for staff to implement and sustain changes.

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

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

Phuong is finding it 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 with regard to teacher development grows, they reflect on their own role and take the next steps to facilitate school-

based professional learning for preschool leaders and teachers.

The VVOB program in Vietnam seeks to strengthen the education system by creating an enabling environment. VVOB does this both at the school level, via collaborative learning and school leaders, and at the district and provincial levels, where education officers in charge of preschool education can facilitate and guide school-based teacher professional development. As school leaders and education officers collaborate with teachers on changing their practices and beliefs about education, they trigger broader system change to achieve quality education for all.

Relevant websites and resources for further reading:

- <https://vietnam.vvob.be/>
- www.vvob.org
- 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)
[/www.vvob.be/en/programmes/vietnam-bami](http://www.vvob.be/en/programmes/vietnam-bami)
- VVOB. (2017). *Putting SDG4 into practice. School leadership. VVOB Technical Brief No 1*. Brussels, Belgium: Author.
www.vvob.be/en/downloads/technical-brief-1-school-leadership

Videos:

- What is process-oriented child monitoring?:
www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hl0_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:
www.youtube.com/user/VVOBVietnam



Education in Vietnam

- Vietnam has a literacy level of 94%.
- Vietnamese students of 15 years of age continue to score high in math on OECD's latest global education survey, known as PISA.
- The Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) oversees all aspects of education in Vietnam.
- The education system consists of kindergarten, primary, secondary, upper-secondary (also referred to as high school), and university level, with nationally administered exit and entrance examinations between each.
- Primary school is five years (6 – 11) and compulsory.
- Secondary school education is divided into lower secondary, which is four years (grades 6-9, ages 11-15), and higher secondary education, which is three years (grades 10-12, ages 15-18), and neither of them are compulsory. There is an entrance and leaving examination. Students have to choose either a natural or social sciences track.

The authors want to express their gratitude to Wouter Boesman, Hans De Greve, Filip Lenaerts, Katelin Raw, and Ly Thi Kim Tran for their critical and constructive contributions to this article.

For More Reading:

- Booth, T., & Ainscow, M. (2016). *Index for inclusion: A guide to school development led by inclusive values* (4th ed.). Cambridge, England: Index for Inclusion Network.
- Cravens, X., & Hallinger, P. (2012). School leadership and change in East Asia: Building capacity for education reform. *Peabody Journal of Education*. Retrieved from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/241729705_School_Leadership_and_Change_in_East_Asia_Building_Capacity_for_Education_Reform
- Hào, T., Hallinger, P., & Chia, W. (2017). Assessing and strengthening instructional leadership among primary school principals in Vietnam. *International Journal of Educational Management*, 32(3). Retrieved from <https://www.emeraldinsight.com/doi/abs/10.1108/IJEM-02-2017-0046>
- Hattie, J. (2003). *Teachers make a difference. What is the research evidence?* Retrieved from https://research.acer.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1003&context=research_conference_2003
- Hattie, J. (2015). *What works best in education: The politics of collaborative expertise. Open ideas at Pearson*. Retrieved from https://www.pearson.com/content/dam/corporate/global/pearson-dot-com/files/hattie/150526_ExpertiseWEB_V1.pdf
- Korthagen, F. (2001). *Linking practice and theory: The pedagogy of realistic teacher education*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Laevers, F. (2011). Experiential education: Making care and education more effective through well-being and involvement. *Encyclopedia on Early Childhood Development*. Retrieved from <http://www.childencyclopedia.com/child-care-early-childhood-education-and-care/according-experts/experientialeducation-making-care>
- Lenaerts, F., Braeye, S., Nguyen, T. L. H., Dang, T. A., & Vromant, N. (2017). Supporting teachers in Vietnam to monitor preschool children's wellbeing and involvement in preschool classrooms. *International Journal of Early Childhood*, 49(2), 245-262. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13158-017-0188-2>
- Ministry of Education and Training. (2013). *Early Development Instrument (EDI) in Vietnam 2013*. Hanoi, Vietnam: Golden Sky.
- National College for Leadership of Schools and Children's Services. (2010). *Ten strong claims about successful school leadership*. Retrieved from <http://dera.ioe.ac.uk/2082/1/10-strong-claims-about-successful-school-leadership.pdf>
- Robinson, V., Lloyd, C., & Rowe, K. (2008). The impact of leadership on student outcomes: An analysis of the differential effects of leadership types. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 44(50), 635-674.
- Socialist Republic of Vietnam. (2010). *Approving the scheme on universal pre-school education of children aged five years in the 2010–2015 period. No. 239/QĐ-TTg*. Hanoi, Vietnam: The Prime Minister's Office.
- Socialist Republic of Vietnam. (2012). *Education development strategic plan for 2011-2020. No. 711/QĐTTg*. Hanoi, Vietnam: The Prime Minister's Office.
- Timperley, H., Wilson, A., Barrar, H., & Fung, I. (2007). *Teacher professional learning and development: Best evidence synthesis iteration*. Wellington, Australia: Ministry of Education.
- Tran, N., Hallinger, P., & Truong, T., (2017). The heart of school improvement: A multi-site case study of leadership for teacher learning in Vietnam. *School Leadership & Management*, 38(1). doi:10.1080/13632434.2017.1371690
- Truong, T., Hallinger, P., & Sanga, K. (2017). Confucian values and school leadership in Vietnam: Exploring the influence of culture on principal decision making. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 45(1), 77-100. Retrieved from <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1741143215607877>
- United Nations Sustainable Development database. Retrieved from <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/indicators/database/> on 1/10/2018
- VVOB. (2017). *Putting SDG4 into practice. School leadership. VVOB Technical Brief No 1*. Brussels, Belgium: VVOB.
- World Bank. (2012). *Well begun, not yet done: Vietnam's remarkable progress on poverty reduction and the emerging challenges*. Hanoi, Vietnam: World Bank in Vietnam.