



Preschool in CITIES: Learning in Da Nang, Vietnam

*Lieve Mieke R Leroy, Thi Chau Nguyen,
and Dinh Khuong Duy Nguyen*

Located in Central Vietnam, right on the coast of the South Chinese Sea, Da Nang is a typical example of a fast-expanding city. Lack of opportunities in rural areas and the growing industry in the city attract many newcomers. While cities offer many sustainable development opportunities for both individuals and society, rapid urbanization does create specific social challenges concerning young children's development. The Da Nang city services are working to ensure that the full potential of urban development benefits all citizens, yet urban growth can put pressure on the education system: it can exhaust the capacity of public schools while also introducing urban stresses. Vulnerable children like those from migrating families and children growing up in economically challenged conditions are particularly vulnerable to urban stress factors.

How can the education system adjust its offerings and pedagogical approach to help children cope with the changing urban environment?

VVOB, a nonprofit organization working on education for development, has joined forces with the Da Nang Department of Education and Training (DOET) in the "Communities of practice Inspiring Teaching Innovations in the early Education System in Vietnam" project (CITIES). The project aims to identify and analyze the barriers to learning children experience in the urban context of the Son Tra district. The project also investigates how the education system can adjust its offer and its pedagogical approach to help children cope with the changing urban environment.

Preschool Education in Vietnam

Since 2009, Vietnam has established a solid foundation in the provision of public preschool, with 95% of 3- to 5-year-old children participating. 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. Despite many policies and guidelines promoting child-centered education and learning through play as well as in-service teacher professional development on these topics provided by the Vietnam Ministry of Education and Training (MOET), teachers struggle with implementation. Preschool teachers have difficulties catering to the diverse needs and addressing barriers experienced by children at risk of not learning. They lack the capacity and methods for dealing with the changes urbanization brings.

The CITIES Project

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

The direct beneficiaries of the project are the teachers and school leaders of eight pilot preschools (six public, two non-public) and the government officials of the Da Nang DOET and Bureaus of Education and Training (BOET). In the first year, the project focused on identifying key barriers to learning that are typical for vulnerable boys and girls in an urban context, and also implemented innovative ways of mitigating some of those barriers.

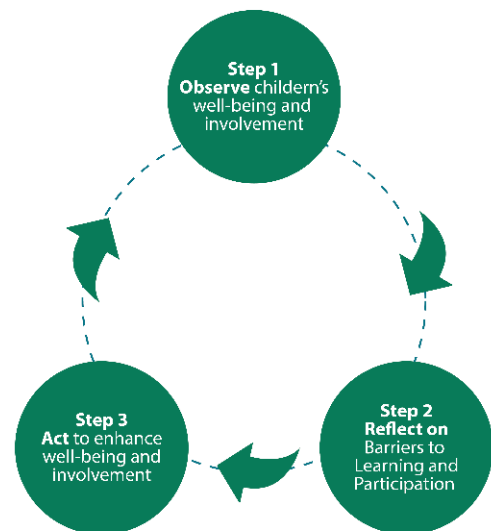
Identifying Barriers to Learning

The project assisted Da Nang preschools in applying the Process-Oriented Child Monitoring methodology to assess well-being and involvement of preschool children as a proxy for learning and participation. They then analyzed the results and identified barriers to learning experienced by the children.

First, they identified education barriers, such as limited and unattractive materials, inappropriate didactics, etc. However, 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 thus built awareness of and understanding on urban challenges and actively involved participants in the data collection. In fact, the data collection was part of the participants' capacity development.

The analysis draws on qualitative data from four focus group discussions with 32 teachers and school leaders; a focus group discussion, with eight parents from a private school; and quantitative data from a questionnaire completed by 29 teachers and school leaders who were asked to respond to questions about both the impact and the frequency of the perceived barriers.

The resulting list of urban barriers to learning included limited time for parents to engage with children due to work; reduced parental well-being; limited clean, green, and safe spaces for playful learning; and new technologies replacing meaningful interactions with others. Chau's story (box) illustrates the urban context experienced by vulnerable preschool children in Da Nang. While most of the barriers are part of global trends affecting children growing up in urban areas, certain aspects of these barriers are specific to the Da Nang context. These perceived barriers are interrelated, portraying the broader changes in Vietnamese urban life and how they impact preschool children's development and participation in school.



Educational and Urban Barriers

Educational Barriers

- Limited and unattractive learning materials
- Inappropriate didactics
- Teacher/child ratio
- Limited parent-teacher contacts
- Pressure from parents on teachers, children

Urban Barriers

- Too much screen time
- Lack of parental time
- Changes in social cohesion
- Limited access to green spaces

Mitigating Barriers

Based on the results, teachers implemented a more differentiated pedagogical approach with preschool pupils experiencing barriers to learning, making changes in materials, activities, interactions, and the learning environment. Via five online learning moments—adhering to COVID-19 preventive measures—participants were exposed to an experimental and innovative methodology.

A group of international and national artists helped participants try out applied artistic practices and interactive drama methods to build socio-emotional skills and resilience.

After trying out the methods, participants analyzed the applicability of the methods for Vietnamese preschool classrooms (Do they conform to curriculum and policy? Do they stimulate children's holistic development?). They also investigated whether these methods contributed to children's well-being and involvement and thus serve to mitigate urban barriers.

Chau: A Child in the City

Chau is 5 years old. She lives with her elder sister and her parents in a budget room for immigrants in Da Nang, one of the biggest cities in Central Vietnam. Chau gets up quite early, at 6 a.m. Her mother takes the two girls on a battered motorbike to a public preschool. Chau has breakfast at school because her parents need to get to the market to buy supplies for their small mobile noodle stall. She spends all day at school and is picked up around 5 p.m. by her mother. Before dinner, she plays with her sister just outside their room. While waiting for her father to return home, she watches television at the next-door neighbor's flat. She goes to bed at 9:30 p.m. On Sundays, when there is no school, Chau and her sister stay at home all day, playing with the few toys they have or spending time on their mother's cell phone. Sometimes, they visit their parents' noodle stall and they get a bowl of leftover noodles. Chau is quite timid and shy. Her parents do not want her to go outside or go across the street to play with other children. They are worried about the traffic and wary of strangers. Although Chau lives less than 3 kilometers from the beach, she has only been there a few times in her life.



The innovative methods were found to stimulate children to create and to reflect on their experiences, which is in line with and supports the directives of the MOET. The methods suit and build on the characteristics of children's cognition, emotions, and actions and, by doing so, facilitate children's holistic development, which is in line with the objectives of the early childhood education curriculum. The innovative activities can be applied alone, but also can be integrated into preschool themes as described in the current early childhood education curriculum. In addition, the methods have the potential to mitigate barriers to learning, especially urban barriers. This will help children in Da Nang city reach higher levels of well-being and involvement. However, the effects and benefits of the methods depend on teachers' deep understanding of the underlying objectives of the innovative methods for the holistic development of children.



Changing the learning environment and materials



Analysing the barriers

Using Urban Opportunities

A city not only creates challenges but also offers opportunities for learning. In a second phase, the project will explore how the arts and real-life learning opportunities available in the city (such as storytelling murals, design for play everywhere, storytelling in the park, etc.) can be educational assets to mitigate certain urban barriers. Teachers, school leaders, and education officers will engage in communities of practice to explore how teachers can use these opportunities offered by urban life.

Education and Sustainable Urban Development

The challenge of sustainable urban development is increasingly being recognized as a key development challenge, although only a limited number of organizations have dedicated programs in place. So far, however, few initiatives target education in an urban context. Despite the high level of commitment to and appreciation for this project from all levels in the education system, from the ministerial level, to city authorities in Da Nang and the school level, the project demonstrates a general lack of awareness about how growing up in a city can affect the learning and participation of preschool children and about the role a school can play in mitigating those barriers.

Conclusion

By focusing on children's well-being and involvement, caregivers/teachers can identify and address barriers both within and outside the school environment and take action to identify and implement innovative ways of mitigating some barriers to ensure that preschool early learning contributes to children's development in relation to the family and (urban) society. Knowledge about urban barriers to learning complemented by tested innovative approaches as generated in the CITIES project will contribute to the education system's capacity to adapt to the fast-changing realities in society. In that way, young children and their families will have better chances to profit from the opportunities of growing up in an urban context.

Acknowledgments: 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.

VVOB Vietnam:

<http://vietnam.vvob.org>
www.vvob.org

Project video:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Do-lqUJUI_o



VVOB – *education for development*

Julien Dillensplein 1 bus 2A
1060 Brussels
Belgium

T • +32 (0)2 209 07 99
E • info@vvob.org

 VVOB

 @VVOBvzw

 VVOB vzw

www.vvob.org



Belgium
partner in development



Flanders
State of the art