

2010

Vietnamese children's perspectives on learning and the provision of primary school education within the rural Na Ri district in Vietnam: pilot project report

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Publication details

Phelps, R & Graham, A 2010, *Vietnamese children's perspectives on learning and the provision of primary school education within the rural Na Ri district in Vietnam: pilot project report*, report prepared for ChildFund Australia, Lismore, NSW, & Centre for Children and Young People, Southern Cross University, Lismore, NSW.

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Vietnamese children's perspectives on learning and the provision of primary school education within the rural Na Ri district in Vietnam

Pilot Project Report



Report compiled by Dr Renata Phelps and Professor Anne Graham
for a collaborative research project between ChildFund Australia and the
Centre for Children and Young People, Southern Cross University Australia.


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SUGGESTED CITATION

Phelps, R. & Graham, A. (2010). *Vietnamese children's perspectives on learning and the provision of quality primary school education within the rural Na Ri district in Vietnam: Report on a Pilot Project*. Prepared for ChildFund Australia. Lismore: Centre for Children and Young People, Southern Cross University.

Note that a Consolidated Report has also been prepared as a separate document and an associated picture-based report for children is also available, titled:

*Feeling Glad and Proud:
Children in Rural Vietnam Have a Say about Learning.*

All these publications, and subsequent papers, can be accessed at:

www.cryp.scu.edu.au

www.childfund.org.au

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors would like to gratefully acknowledge:

- The 46 children who participated in the research, and who shared their thoughts and photographs; and their families who supported their children's participation;
- The teachers who helped facilitate our interviews with children;
- Ha Thi Tuyet Nhung who played a key role in managing the project in Vietnam;
- Doan Thi Linh, ChildFund's Education Project Officer in Bac Kan;
- The interviewers - Ha Thi Quynh Anh, Ton Thi Tam, Le Dan Dung and Ha Thi Tuyet Nhung; and
- ChildFund management and staff who supported the project.

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Executive Summary

Developing countries face an urgent imperative to improve the equity, quality, relevance and authenticity of their education provision. This is critical if they are to develop a literate but also creative and innovative population to support their continued economic development. In recent years, Vietnam has been making remarkable progress in alleviating poverty and inequality. However, with 41% of its population under the age of 18, Vietnam faces considerable challenges in educating its children. Vietnam's traditional educational practices, like those of other Asian countries, are curriculum driven and focus predominantly on rote memorisation, passive learning approaches and print-based knowledge from text books. However, the Vietnamese government has recently introduced a new curriculum promoting 'child-centred learning'.

This research was initiated by ChildFund Australia as part of its increased commitment to research that: enhances knowledge of children's experience; builds organisational expertise; contributes to improved effectiveness in aid operations; and enhances ChildFund's profile, influence and public support. The research is a pilot study that will inform the development of a larger scale project.

The aim of the research was three-fold, namely to better understand: (a) Vietnamese children's experiences of, and views on, learning and primary schooling in rural and remote communities (within the district of Na Ri, Bac Kan province); (b) how their views about learning and education might inform the development of future quality, basic education provided in a safe and stimulating environment; and (c) the ethical and methodological issues involved in undertaking culturally appropriate research in Vietnam that incorporates children's views and voices.

The project involved in-depth interviews, utilising photo- and drawing-elicitation methods, with 46 children aged 9-10 (upper primary age) drawn from across four different schools. These children were invited to talk about their learning both at home and at school, with an emphasis on *how* they learnt in both these contexts.

Summary of findings

Constructions of 'learning'

1. In the traditional Vietnamese context, 'learning' is perceived in solely formal academic terms – that which happens at school, and through school work taken home (i.e. homework). Such perceptions were held by the young participants in our study. Only through extensive discussion and prompting did children come to a broader understanding of 'learning' consistent with the interests of this research. The data revealed a considerable disjuncture between the social and cultural constructions of 'learning' and 'teaching' and children's understandings of their own agency and learning capability.
2. Children had considerable difficulty articulating 'how' they learn and it appears that metacognitive learning processes are rarely practiced in Vietnamese educational or social systems. There was little evidence of teachers providing children with process-based support, such as strategies to aid memorisation or recall, despite the heavy emphasis on this in schools.

Children's agency and voice

3. The children interviewed were very capable of performing a wide range of domestic and agricultural tasks from an early age and they predominantly learn these tasks from parents, siblings, other family members or by teaching themselves through observation. There are many community-based activities which children participate in.

4. Almost all children indicated intrinsic happiness from learning new things and genuinely enjoy contributing to their families' lives through domestic tasks. In many respects they took for granted their skills and capacity in this context.
5. Children demonstrated a strong sense of autonomy, self-responsibility and agency. They embraced and enjoyed the challenge to become self-sufficient in their out-of-school lives. Many children saw themselves – their ability to try their best and to pay attention - as the most important element influencing their learning success.
6. Children also evidenced a deep respect for adults and placed a strong emphasis on morality and moral behaviour. School played a very important role in transmitting and reinforcing dominant social norms and values, such as respect and obedience.
7. Most children had clear views on what they would like to do when they grow up, with professional roles such as teaching, policing or medicine most frequently cited. All of the students perceived value in their schooling for their future careers, particularly regarding literacy, numeracy, and practical skills such as sewing and morality.
8. Children were conscious and critical of the behaviour of their peers and attributed issues and problems, as well as solutions to these, to their own actions and behaviours.
9. While there was some indication of perceived power imbalances, cultural assumptions about children's views not being heard or respected were somewhat challenged by the findings. While children were a little reserved and evidently respectful of adults they did feel able to raise suggestions and make some criticisms within the limitations of their knowledge and experience.

Experiences of schooling

10. Children generally spoke of feeling happy and confident at school. They particularly liked the opportunity to play with friends, listen to the lessons of their teachers and gain new knowledge. Having a clean environment with lots of trees was important to many. School had intrinsic value and provided enjoyment and self-improvement. Mathematics was predominantly the favourite subject and English was the least favoured.
11. While most children were comfortable seeking help from their friends or teachers, some were reluctant to ask for assistance from teachers, particularly during class time. Children didn't like being scolded or punished at school, especially when they didn't understand the lesson.
12. Almost all children believed that their teachers liked school, liked them as children and were committed to helping their future. Many conveyed a close and warm relationship with their teachers and there was some evidence of genuine care by teachers for their students.
13. Children initially showed reluctance to identify suggestions for change at their school. However, sanitation, cleanliness and building conditions emerged as major issues influencing their wellbeing and happiness at school. Minimal exposure to media, or to communities and schools beyond their own hamlet inevitably impacted on what they were able to suggest. Generally, children seemed accepting of their learning environment, just wanting it to be clean and safe.

Supporting children's learning

14. There appeared to be a strong culture of support for children's learning in these rural communities. Children themselves shared this commitment and embraced the value of learning, recognising and appreciating the role adults played in supporting them.
15. Teachers were identified as the key element in helping them learn. However, for many it was not the teachers' personality, or the child's relationship with the teacher per se that was identified by children as helping them to learn. Rather, emphasis was placed on the value of teachers' lectures and instructions, their examples, demonstrations, explanations and exercises.
16. The challenging nature of the curriculum and the emphasis on content over learning process significantly influenced the learning experiences of children. Content appeared to be covered in discrete subjects with no indication of rich integrated tasks and little evidence of teaching approaches such as experiential learning, inquiry-based learning, or reflection.

Issues related to authenticity and relevance of curriculum to children's' lives were also evident.

17. Memorisation through repetition and practice played an important role in children's learning. Many spoke of being involved in group work, however in most cases this seemed to refer to sitting in a group to do individual work. All children were enthusiastic about their text books, particularly appreciating their pictures, and many seemed to have difficulty disassociating the text from the subject itself. Very few children talked about other resources or pictorial materials in their classroom or in the local environment and fun or humour was rarely mentioned.
18. All children had regular or daily homework and generally felt that there was help available to them if required. None of the children who were interviewed stated that they had too many house or farm chores to complete their homework or that they missed school because of a need to help their families. Most children reported that their parents were very active with their school, attending parent meetings and doing voluntary work on school buildings and grounds. Children very much liked their parents being involved in these ways.
19. Children appreciated receiving praise and encouragement. While some reported being scolded or reprimanded at school, there did not seem to be a culture of children being unduly or overly reprimanded by either teachers or parents.

Children's involvement in research

20. There was considerable evidence that researcher exchange is a critical element in conducting culturally sensitive research.
21. Children's responses were, at times, complex, nuanced and contradictory, revealing the need for researchers to continue to probe and seek clarification from children around ambiguous responses. The ability to do so, however, is integrally tied to the interviewers sharing a common understanding of the key issues relevant to the project, including any cultural considerations in investigating these.
22. Re-presenting children's perspectives in any research is fraught with difficulties and this is further complicated where translation is involved.
23. Children indicated that they had directly benefitted from the interviews and appreciated the opportunity to offer their views and be heard. They saw it as important and respectful for children and adults to listen to each other.

As an initial project between ChildFund Australia and the Centre for Children and Young People, these findings point to some important recommendations, including for further research. These recommendations are consistent with ChildFund's strategic priorities in relation to:

- Building the capacity of teachers and educational managers;
- Improving school buildings and infrastructure;
- Awareness raising for parents;
- Non-formal education activities; and
- Building the agency of children and young people.





Overview of the Project

1.1 Introduction

This report provides a detailed overview of a collaborative pilot research project undertaken by the Centre for Children and Young People (CCYP) at Southern Cross University in conjunction with ChildFund Australia.

ChildFund Australia has a strong commitment to the rights of children and young people, including the promotion of their participation in decisions which affect the design, delivery and evaluation of their programs. The research partnership was initiated by ChildFund Australia which sought to increase its involvement in research activities so as to: enhance knowledge of children's experience; build organisational expertise; contribute to improved effectiveness in aid operations; and enhance ChildFund's profile, influence and public support.

The collaboration between ChildFund Australia and the CCYP has been underpinned by a commitment to child-centred and participatory research. Together we share a deep respect for children's lives, a focus on supporting their wellbeing and an aim of giving children a voice on issues that affect their daily lives and their chances for a better future.

1.2 Background and context

Developing countries face an urgent imperative to enhance the equity, quality, relevance and authenticity of their education provision if they are to develop a literate but also creative and innovative population to support their continued economic development. Yet many such countries are faced with significant challenges in terms of infrastructure, equity in service provision, teacher supply, experience and qualifications, and inadequate participation rates due to a complex array of social and economic factors. Education systems are often under-resourced due to limited governmental revenue raising capacity or decisions about budget allocation. An increasing number of international non-government organisations (NGOs) seek to support developing countries to improve their provision of education and to enhance educational outcomes for children.

Vietnam has made remarkable progress in relation to alleviating poverty and inequality and while approximately 40% of the total population has risen from poverty since 1993 (ChildFund in Vietnam, 2007; Harpham, Nguyen Thu Huong, Tran Thap Long, & Tran Tuan, 2004) progress has slowed in recent years, especially in rural regions. Around 16% of Vietnam's population (around 14 million people) still remain in poverty, which in 2010 was defined in rural areas as a household with income below 200,000 Vietnamese dong per month (approx. \$12 Australian).

With 41% of its population under the age of 18 (ChildFund in Vietnam, 2007), Vietnam is committed to enhancing both participation rates and quality of education. While school attendance in the early years is now quite high, there are significant issues in student retention in secondary schools, particularly in high ethnic regions. Children in remote and disadvantaged areas of Vietnam, particularly those from minority groups, have high levels of non-participation and face considerable social and economic inequities.

Vietnam's traditional educational practices, like those of other Asian countries, are text-book driven and focus predominantly on rote memorisation, passive learning approaches, print-based knowledge, competition rather than collaboration and an overly academic and theoretical engagement with subject matter (Hamano, 2008; Peyser, Gerard, & Roegiers, 2006; Roxas, 2004). Most recently, these approaches have been recognised as resulting in poor problem solving skills and creativity, as well as limiting the capacity of students to work independently (Duggan, 2001; Pellini, 2008). Yet, in contexts of poverty and disadvantage, lateral thinking and problem solving can enhance children's coping capacity by enabling them to identify alternative options to their current circumstances and devising creative solutions (Feeny & Boyden, 2003b).

Since 2002 the Vietnamese government has introduced a new curriculum promoting 'child-centred learning'. However, there are major challenges in implementing this curriculum, particularly in rural and remote areas, where recruitment of appropriate teachers is problematic, teacher quality and motivation is low and in-service training and professional development is difficult to provide.

A number of international NGOs have been active in Vietnam, supporting development and provision of educational services, particularly in rural and remote areas. Some, including ChildFund Australia, have been interested in supporting the implementation of curriculum reform and in promoting and fostering more child-focused pedagogy.

Recent research in the area of community development emphasises the importance of building the agency of children and young people by recognising their perspectives and providing forms of assistance that focus on their abilities and their potential as change agents (Boyden, Eyber, Feeny, & Scott, 2003; Feeny & Boyden, 2003a, 2003b; Lyytikainen, Jones, Hutty, & Abramsky, 2006; Schwartzman, 2005). ChildFund Australia is committed to providing forms of assistance to communities that focus on children's abilities and their potential as change agents as opposed to their weaknesses and their adversity (Feeny & Boyden, 2003b, p.13). They thus seek to involve young people in age appropriate ways and to engage them in activities that set high expectations, focus on their strengths, foster resilience and prepare them for adulthood while retaining choice, challenge, fun and friendship (Schwartzman, 2005).

In entering into a partnership to conduct collaborative research in Vietnam, both ChildFund Australia and the CCYP were interested in exploring the environments and contexts where children's learning occurs and which are meaningful for children themselves – whether these be institutional or non-institutional. Such an approach, it was felt, could 'help adults become more attentive and responsive to places that engage children, physically and emotionally and encourage educators and teachers to scrutinize their own institutional settings and expand their understandings of "children's places"' (Rasmussen, 2004). This approach is consistent with contemporary socio-cultural perspectives that children and childhood are worthy of investigation in their own right, that children are knowledgeable, competent experts on their own lives, and that they have a valuable contribution to make (Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth and NSW Commission for Children and Young People, 2009; Einarsdottir, 2007; Neal, 2004; Smart, 2006; Smith, 2007a; Taylor, 2006b).

Whilst respecting and promoting children's entitlement to 'having a say', the research also acknowledges the ways in which children's participation is deeply implicated within broader social and cultural contexts. Acknowledging that children's views are not traditionally 'heard' within Vietnamese culture, a key consideration of any research that incorporates children's views and voices must respectfully consider ethical and methodological issues.

1.3 Project aim

Given this background and context, the aim of this project was three-fold in seeking to better understand:

- Vietnamese children's experiences of, and views on, learning and primary schooling in rural and remote communities (within the district of Na Ri, Bac Kan province);
- how their views about learning and education might inform the development of quality, basic education provided in a safe and stimulating environment; and
- the ethical and methodological issues involved in undertaking culturally appropriate research in Vietnam that incorporates children's views and voices.

The project reflects a deep commitment to better understanding and describing children's experiences of learning and of education in their immediate context and much consideration has been given to undertaking sound, respectful research that is culturally relevant to the lives of children in Vietnam.

1.4 Overview of the research process

The research was developed as a pilot study and chose to focus on in-depth interviews, utilising photo- and drawing-elicitation methods, with 50 children aged 8-10 (upper primary age) from the Na Ri district of Bac Kan province, Vietnam. The research took place between September 2009 – April 2010 and was intended to trial methods and processes in preparation for a subsequent larger scale study.

A key component of the research process was the collaborative capacity building of both the Vietnamese and Australian researchers. Staff from the CCYP provided training in research methods while the Vietnamese researchers supported the CCYP staff to develop cultural and practical understandings about conducting research in Vietnam.

Two Vietnamese researchers were initially recruited to the project, including the key Vietnamese-based coordinator, Ha Thi Tuyet Nhung (Nhung) who was the Education Coordinator and Manager of ChildFund Australia in Vietnam. Both Nhung and Ha Thi Quynh Anh (Quynh Anh) visited Australia in October 2009 to collaboratively plan and prepare for the research with CCYP staff. They then replicated the training with a further two recruited researchers in Vietnam, Le Thi Dan Dung (Dung) and Ms Ton Thi Tam (Tam).

Support for the project was obtained from the District Education Office and ethics approval was gained through Southern Cross University's Human Research Ethics Committee. Sampling, initial recruitment and briefing of children, parents and teachers involved the close collaboration and support from ChildFund's Education Project Officer from Bac Kan province, Doan Thi Linh.

The first field trip occurred from 6-9th December 2009. Two focus groups were held involving 20 children. This was an opportunity to further explain the project to the children and to provide them with a camera, which they were asked to keep for 24 hours to take photos showing aspects of their day-to-day life that tell a story about their learning and schooling. The intention was then to interview the 20 children, however due to problems with the cameras utilised in the first field trip, interviews with only 10 of the 20 children proceeded.

Data was then transcribed and translated and returned to the CCYP researchers. After initial analysis, Dr Renata Phelps from the Centre for Children and Young People visited Hanoi and worked with the Vietnamese researchers providing feedback on the initial data, and refining the methods and interview questions.

The second field trip occurred from 24-27th January 2010, where a further four focus groups and 36 interviews took place (including those children whose cameras hadn't worked in field trip one but excluding four children who missed the interview due to a sporting event). Again, data was transcribed and translated and returned to Australia for analysis. This report was drafted by the CCYP researchers, in collaboration with ChildFund staff and the Vietnamese-based research team.

Children's perspectives and ideas were also documented in a children's book titled *Feeling Glad and Proud: Children in rural Vietnam have a say about learning*. The purpose of the book was to explain some of the key findings to the children themselves in a positive and affirming way. A presentation was also made to teachers and other educational representatives in Na Ri to convey the project findings to them. The findings of the study were also reported to ChildFund in Vietnam staff at a professional development day in May 2010.

1.5 Significance of the study

While this report details the findings of a relatively small pilot project, this initial study is considered significant in its contribution to knowledge and practice at both the international and national level.

1.5.1 International significance

This research has the potential to directly influence service provision by community development NGOs working with children, their families, teachers and communities and to improve educational and wellbeing outcomes for children. The study substantially progresses knowledge about how educational and community development organisations and schools can enhance their services by working in more participatory, child-focused ways, informed by a deep understanding of, and respect for, children's lives. This is significant in that it challenges traditional approaches to community and educational development and aims to address educational inequality and disadvantage by directly seeking the views, perspectives and visions of children and young people.

The study is particularly significant within the South East Asian context where teaching methods have been traditionally authoritarian and teacher centred, influenced by the content-heavy nature of curriculum. In the context of Vietnam's recent policy and curriculum reform focused on enhancing quality in educational provision through the implementation of child-focused educational approaches, this project makes a unique contribution to understanding learning and teaching from the perspective of children themselves. The research thus has the potential to enhance Vietnamese children and young people's ability to shape education to be relevant and meaningful for them, both in schools and in community, and to support them to see learning as a positive, lifelong and life-sustaining imperative. The research is also potentially significant for Australia and other Western contexts where children's perspectives are also rarely considered in the development of educational policy and programs.

The project is highly innovative in that it documents children's perspectives on their own learning, what is important to them, what engages them, as well as their visions for the future of education provision. It is also of methodological significance in that it extends understanding of the issues involved in undertaking culturally appropriate research that incorporates children's views and voices in developing countries. Knowledge gained through the study on issues surrounding culturally appropriate ways of enhancing child and youth participation, while not intended to be generalised, will be highly relevant in other south-east Asian countries.

1.5.2 Economic and social significance for Australia

Recent Australian Governments, both Coalition and Labor, have committed to increasing Australia's contribution to international development assistance. The current Labor Government, for example, has pledged to a substantial increase in Australia's Official Development Assistance (ODA) from 2008 levels of 0.34% of gross national income (GNI) to 0.5% of GNI by 2015 (Smith, 2008, 2010), and has reiterated this commitment despite the global economic crisis. The priority for expenditure is to improve delivery of basic services, with education being seen as a 'flagship of the aid program' (Smith, 2010). The Australian public also contribute substantial funds to international non-government development agencies, and this contribution has been increasing in recent years. In 2007 the Australian public donated \$780 million to aid and development work through Australian NGOs, an increase of around 7.5% compared with the previous year (Australian Council for International Development, 2009).

Vietnam is a very important geographical focus for the Australian Government and numerous NGOs including ChildFund. ODA for Vietnam is one of the larger allocations and will be \$106 million in 2009/10 (Smith, 2009). Australian Government investments in Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos and other countries in the region are expected to increase. It is clearly in the interests of good public policy, effective expenditure of Australian government and public funds and realisation of the Millenium Development Goals (MDGs) that development activity in the area of education be informed by quality research, as represented in this research proposal.

In light of growing funding and demands by donors for greater accountability, AusAID and Australian development NGOs are endeavouring to improve their 'development effectiveness' (see, for example, the Paris declaration on development effectiveness, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2005). This research can play a significant role in informing policy and practice and enhancing outcomes from development funding. It does so both through its specific findings about children's perspectives on learning and schooling in rural Vietnam, but also in relation to processes of engaging and consulting with children in decisions which affect the design, delivery and evaluation of community development activities that affect their lives.



Literature Review

This pilot study has been informed by a range of key literature related to:

- **Community development, education and the recognition of children's agency**, specifically in contexts of poverty alleviation;
- **Vietnam's education system**, including historical influences and contemporary factors influencing participation, curriculum and teaching methods, teacher recruitment, training and professional development, and recent curriculum developments;
- **Children and childhood in Vietnam**, including social and cultural influences, issues around children's rights and consultation and participation practices; and
- **Perspectives on children's participation**, particularly in relation to children's participation in educational research.

In this section of the report we provide an overview of this literature.

2.1 Community development, education and the recognition of children's agency

Education has been a major focus of much contemporary community development activities. Such work is increasingly informed by a growing body of evidence concerning the critical role that education plays in addressing issues of disadvantage. Most recently, focus has been turned to issues of quality in education provision. In particular, curriculum which is relevant to the lives of children, and which develops lateral thinking and problem solving skills, enhances children's agency in contexts of poverty. In this section we explore the literature related to these ideas.

2.1.1 Education and poverty alleviation

Education plays a critical role in addressing a range of issues of disadvantage, poverty and children's rights and is at the heart of development and poverty reduction. Schools are important places for social change and are well positioned to challenge issues such as discrimination, violence, gender equality and sustainability and to foster the capacity of future generations. As argued by Archer (2005) schools are able to focus as much on unlearning as learning.

The greatest progress in reducing poverty is being made in countries that combine effective and equitable investment in education with sound economic policies. Education enables people to develop, use and extend their capabilities; to lead healthier and more productive lives; and to participate in decision-making and in the transformation of their lives and societies. Education is central to the achievement of greater equality in society, and investing in the education of girls has especially powerful benefits not only for civic participation and family health and welfare but also positive implications for all other measures of development (Passingham, Nguyen Nguyet Nga, & Shaw, 2002, p.1).

Archer (2005, p.22) points out that 'in the 1980s and 1990s there were almost no examples of NGOs coming together on education and almost no examples of coherent engagement by NGOs with government around education policy'. Now, however, education is a major priority in community development activities and there are increasing numbers of NGOs linking with other organisations such as teacher unions, parent associations, child rights activists and social movements to focus on improving participation in, and quality of, education (Archer, 2005).

Education is a priority for Australia's major international aid funding body, AusAID, as well as many international NGOs, including ChildFund. The Australian Government ODA investment in education is increasing, with 18% of total ODA (\$690 million) committed to education in 2009/10 (Smith, 2009). International development NGOs are also making substantial, and

increasing, investments in education. AusAID acknowledge that investigation of policy and practice in education is critical and has identified 'education' as one of nine research priority themes (AusAID, 2008).

Education's central focus for the international aid community is enshrined in the **UN Millennium Development Goals** (United Nations, 2009). Goal 2 is to 'ensure that, by 2015, children everywhere, boys and girls alike, will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling'. As Archer (2005) explains, interpretation of this goal has been an issue, and 'most agencies now interpret this as meaning that all children will have completed a course of primary education by 2015, meaning that they should all be enrolled in school by 2010 at the very latest'.

A parallel international driver of education in poverty alleviation is the **Education for All Framework** developed at the World Education Forum in Dakar in 2000 (a few months before the Millennium Summit that set the Millennium Development Goals). The Dakar Framework sets six goals related to adult literacy, early childhood education, lower secondary and youth education and quality (Archer, 2005).

Most recently, however, focus has begun to turn from a focus on participation rates to an emphasis on issues of quality in education provision.

2.1.2 The issue of educational quality

As emphasised in a recent United Nations report (United Nations, 2009), the community development sector is now recognising that the quality of education is as important as enrolment. Quality education provision, as conceived by the Dakar World Education Forum Drafting Committee (cited in Sadiman, 2004), is understood broadly as requiring:

- Healthy, well nourished and motivated students;
- Well motivated and professionally competent teachers;
- Active learning techniques;
- A relevant curriculum;
- Adequate, environmentally friendly and easily accessible facilities;
- Healthy, safe and protective learning environments;
- A clear definition and accurate assessment of learning outcomes, including knowledge, skills, attitudes and values;
- Participatory governance and management; and
- Respect for, and engagement with, local communities and cultures.

A number of writers point to the need for continuing dialogue on expanding concepts of 'quality' in education to embrace concepts of equity, inclusivity, 'child friendliness' and 'learner-centredness' (Seel, 2007). As Sadiman (2004) explains:

The teaching learning process should put the students as subject not as an object. Students must be active in learning and they should not only learn about subject matters but also to learn how to learn. Teachers should play their new role in preparing students for an emerging knowledge-based and technology-driven economy. It is unrealistic to expect the low quality and less dedicated teachers to perform this new role.

A relevant curriculum, which addresses the need of students, community and work place, should be used in good quality education. In most of the countries it is considered that curriculum is overloaded and should be reformed. Mismatching between what students learn at school and what the community or world of work demands is also an issue to address. This is the irrelevant curriculum and teaching learning process that contribute to the widening gap between education institutions and world of work, and finally contributes to increasing unemployment rate (Sadiman, 2004, p.4).

Measures such as enhancing the status of teaching to attract knowledgeable, innovative, motivated and dedicated teachers, and providing opportunities and incentives for professional development for existing teachers, are key to enhancing educational quality.

Sadiman (2004) describes how various South East Asian countries are focused on revising curriculum to make it more relevant and appropriate, including matching skills provided by schools with the skills required by industry and the world of work. In Singapore, for example,

there have been moves to reduce syllabus content, infuse information technology and thinking skills into the curriculum and introduce project work, as well as to differentiate teaching and learning processes to students' individual needs.

As highlighted by Feeny and Boyden (2003b, p.13) 'children who are capable of lateral thinking and problem solving can enhance their coping (in contexts of poverty) by identifying alternative options to their current circumstances and devising creative solutions'. For example, schools can help children and young adults become aware of health issues such as outbreaks of dengue fever and malaria and children can tell their parents how to recognise the signs of health problems and possible solutions, thus diffusing health education into the community (Roxas, 2004). Such examples reiterate the importance of quality of education:

Education must involve a meaningful learning process that develops not only literacy and numeracy, but also life skills and the capacity to think and to reflect. Education should encourage initiative, flexibility and adaptability, the personal qualities that are conducive to greater empowerment, behavioural change and access to a wider range of livelihood opportunities (Passingham, et al., 2002, p.1).

Although it is widely assumed by many that schooling is universally beneficial to children in any context, Feeny and Boyden (2003a) warn that such a simplistic understanding of schooling is 'dangerously complacent', noting that there are many reasons why children leave school, including cases where children leave physical or psychological abuse from teachers, humiliation by other children, or discouragement from unproductive time in schools without learning anything of value or relevance. Similarly, it is too simplistic to assume that children who leave school are ignorant or are not learning important things for their future lives, or that work has a detrimental effect on education. 'As a strategy for overcoming poverty, education is often expensive and unreliable, as the child is by no means guaranteed a job at graduation', leading to disillusionment and a realisation that, in practice, investment in education often fails to pay off (Boyden, et al., 2003, p.106).

Literacy and schooling are consistently held up as the universal keys to breaking the cycle of poverty in the literature, despite increasing evidence from many countries that education may be contextually useless or damaging, particularly for girls. The benefits are far from automatic, and are rarely available to all (Feeny & Boyden, 2003a).

Of course this is not to argue that schooling is not of critical importance, but that its role and value needs to be continuously questioned in its cultural context and that the views of children and young people themselves on schooling need to be heard.

2.1.3 Recognising children's agency

In recent years, there has been a fundamental shift in thinking in many western countries regarding children's status and capacity to participate in social and political life. A number of powerful influences, including The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and the broad field of childhood studies, have challenged the ways in which children's voices have been excluded or marginalised in research, policy and practice that seeks to improve their wellbeing. It is increasingly recognised that 'children and young people bring different, legitimate and valuable perspectives to significant policy debates' (Bessell, 2009b, p.62). In essence, these and other contributions reflect a growing acknowledgment of children as persons in their own right and as worthy of recognition, respect and voice.

Children's views matter for understanding their own behaviour and how they interact with family, peers and institutions and are critical in developing effective policy responses to the challenges economically disadvantaged children face (Redmond, 2008). Treating children as passive is inappropriate, as children's agency can both help them help themselves in coping with their daily lives and also improve the finances and functioning of their families.

Children's participation, whether in planning and policy development or in relation to their own routine and lived experiences, has been shown to help them develop a sense of belonging, gain new skills and experiences, meet new people and friends and build a sense of their own agency (Greene & Hill, 2006; Smart, 2002, 2006; Smith, 2002, 2007b). A substantial body of research points to the importance children, themselves, attribute to being recognised and acknowledged as individuals with opinions and feelings of their own and as agents capable of contributing to decisions made in their everyday lives (Graham, 2004; Parkinson, Cashmore, & Single, 2007; Smart, 2002; Taylor, 2006a). This view contrasts with previous conceptions of children as 'non-citizens', 'not-full citizens' or 'citizens in the making', unable to know their own best interests or as dependants in need of protection (Taylor, Tapp, & Henaghan, 2007).

While in many countries children have become increasingly important to contemporary social and political agendas, their views and perspectives have not necessarily been adequately or ethically responded to (Hill, Davis, Prout, & Tisdall, 2004). Increasingly, observers are voicing concerns about the extent to which children's roles and contributions are taken seriously, even in those policy and project initiatives intended to promote their participation (Davis & Hill, 2006). An increasing number of critiques point to a widening gap between the rationale for children's participation and documented evidence about the impact and outcomes from their involvement – in other words, what difference their participation makes, and for whom (Davis, Farrier, & Whiting, 2006; Kirby & Bryson, 2002; Partridge, 2005).

... Despite such representations of the “voices of children” children themselves may, nonetheless, continue to find their voices silenced, suppressed, or ignored in their everyday lives. Children may not be asked their views and opinions, and even if they are consulted, their views may be dismissed (James, 2007, p.261).

James' concerns are echoed across a variety of settings where children's involvement is largely undemocratic and fails to fulfil its original aims (Davis & Hill, 2006; Percy-Smith, 2005; Thomas, 2006). Importantly for the current project, children report that even when they are involved in participatory opportunities, they receive little feedback regarding the value of their contribution and observe little evidence that their views are responded to in the actions or decisions taken (Kirby & Bryson, 2002; Morgan, 2005). As Wessells suggests, the development of meaningful social relations is core to the conceptualisation and practice of children's participation:

Children participate in activities not because they are entitled to do so per se but because they derive a sense of meaning and positive relations from their participation. Although children's participation is a cornerstone of the CRC, children's will to participate derives less from their sense of entitlement than from their own sense of their role and social relations. This insight... suggests that the best means of achieving high levels of children's participation is not to tell children of their entitlement but to encourage social relations in which children's participation becomes a natural part of their social life (Wessells, 2005, p.14).

Hence, children's participation is best framed not only in terms of the idea of children as agents in their own development but also in terms of its potential for reciprocity and the strengthening of broader social relationships – with peers, family and community (Feeny & Boyden, 2003b). Indeed, Lundy (2007) suggests that, for participation to be effective, consideration must be given to 3 important features: a) *space* (the opportunity to express a view); b) *audience* (the view must be listened to) and; c) *influence* (the view should be responded to or acted upon, as appropriate). This approach also implies a relational dimension to participation where children and adults collaborate for change.

There is good evidence to suggest that children's participation contributes to the wellbeing of communities in that when children's voices inform policy, they are more likely to be sensitive to the needs and perspectives of children, and therefore more likely to work (Davis & Hill, 2006; Wierenga, Wood, University of Melbourne Youth Research Centre, & Foundation for Young Australians, 2003). At its most basic, children's participation is a right through which children are able to lay claim to the status of citizen (Cairns, 2006; Hart, 1992; Li, 2005).

2.1.4 Children's perspectives and agency in poverty alleviation

Increasingly, community development agencies are recognising the importance of focusing on children and young people's participation. A number of recent studies concerning poverty reduction in developing countries have highlighted the importance of building the agency of children and young people by recognising their perspectives and providing forms of assistance that focus on their abilities and potential as change agents (Boyden, et al., 2003; Feeny & Boyden, 2003a, 2003b; Lyytikainen, et al., 2006; Schwartzman, 2005). Such developments are consistent with the UNCRC, which reinforces understandings that children's views and perspectives are critical in the creation of social institutions that are responsive to them. For countries to meet their protection, provision and participation obligations under the UNCRC, including in relation to education provision and poverty alleviation, children's experiences and perspectives need to be heard and taken into account.

Being treated with dignity and respect means being recognised as a person rather than a 'problem', and being listened to without being judged... Being listened to because what you have to say is considered valuable is a sign of respect and an acknowledgement of competency... Thus agency – the ability to take control of your life – is linked clearly to dignity and respect, and being treated with dignity and respect can increase feelings of self-respect and a sense of agency (Neville, Bessel, & Moore, 2007, p.1).

Children's perspectives on economic and social disadvantage have rarely been heard (Redmond, 2008), and since traditional discourse around poverty is based on adult ideas and assumptions it is now being recognised that children may not share the same priorities as adults in their communities (Feeny & Boyden, 2003b). While acknowledging that there are *some* universals, Feeny and Boyden highlight that childhood is an extremely diverse life phase, shaped by material, cultural and social environments, genetic heritage, personal agency and economic and political circumstances (Boyden, et al., 2003; Feeny & Boyden, 2003a, 2003b).

Redmond's review of literature surrounding children's perspectives on economic adversity in 'rich countries' highlighted that children are not so concerned about their lack of resources, *per se*, but exclusion from activities that other children take for granted, together with embarrassment and shame about not being able to participate on equal terms with other children. Redman's work also highlights that children's agency matters for children and their parents and family. Children can use their agency creatively and with resourcefulness and optimism to reduce the impact of economic adversity but can also 'turn their agency inwards, leading to them lowering their own aspirations, excluding themselves from a range of activities, or engaging in activities that attract social disapproval' (Redmond, 2008, p.i).

The ChildFund Alliance, of which ChildFund Australia is part, founds its work on the Christian Children's Fund (CCF) Poverty Framework (Wordsworth, McPeak, & Feeny, 2005). This framework identifies that children experience poverty in three interrelated domains (the DEV dimensions): Deprivation (lack of essential material conditions and services); exclusion (on the basis of age, gender, class, caste etc); and vulnerability (with regard the changing array of threats in their environments). This approach to poverty highlights that:

- Childhood is not a uniform life phase and that the circumstances, experiences and vulnerabilities of children are highly variable;
- Children understand poverty as deeply physical, emotional and social experiences, and thus more than material deprivation;
- Children are more sensitive to, and affected by, poverty than adults;
- Children experience poverty as a continuously changing, non-static state; and
- Children are not passive recipients but active contributors to their own wellbeing and have options and make choices.

(ChildFund in Vietnam, 2007; Feeny & Boyden, 2003a, 2003b)

CCF's research illustrates that many children with social and economic responsibilities 'do not regard themselves as dependent on adults so much as *interdependent* with adults, playing their own part in household maintenance and survival' (Wordsworth, et al., 2005, p.20). Social and economic responsibilities are normal features of childhood with positive outcomes for children and their families and thus, rather than attempting to remove these responsibilities, it may be better to ensure that the burdens are equally shared, not harmful and compatible with schooling (Feeny & Boyden, 2003b). Childhood is a period of social and economic responsibility where children are effective agents contributing to family wellbeing. Age appropriate roles and responsibilities can be a vital source of self esteem and motivation for many children (Feeny & Boyden, 2003b). There is a tendency to present the lives of poor populations, and particularly of children, as dominated and paralysed by poverty. Yet despite their difficult circumstances children are able to speak of a positive life and hope wider than poverty (Boyden, et al., 2003; Feeny & Boyden, 2003b).

Research that is done *with* children rather than *on* or about them (Smart, Neale, & Wade, 2001) is critically important in elevating children's voices into the spheres of public policy and practice, where planning and decisions concerning their lives are largely determined. Yet studies focused on eliciting young people's views on their schools, educational systems and ways their learning can be supported generally are not widely reported, despite the fact that 'students have a great deal to say about school and classroom conditions that influence what they do, how they feel about themselves as students, and how they perceive their school as an educational and social setting' (Phelan, Davidson, & Cao, 1992, p.696). Children's participation in educational and community development research contexts is thus crucial in ensuring that policy is sensitive and responsive to their needs and therefore more likely to work.

2.1.5 Children's perspectives on education and learning

While the UNCRC has gone some considerable way to positioning children as partners and stakeholders in decision making processes that affect them, it is surprising that so little research and practice has focused on seeking children and young people's views on education and learning. This is particularly interesting since 'schools and the education systems more broadly not only affect but arguably dominate the lives of many children' (Bessell, 2009b). While schools in western educational systems have in recent times moved to establishment of student councils to provide a voice for students, as Bessell (2009b, p.62) argues, the influence of such bodies 'rarely extends beyond the individual school into policy debates and decision-making'.

Students have a great deal to say about school and classroom conditions that influence what they do, how they feel about themselves as students, and how they perceive their school as an educational and social setting (Phelan, et al., 1992). They have important insights to contribute to educational policy and practice, insights which are 'often different - and sometimes deeper - than those of adults, particularly policymakers who do not experience the 'sharp end' of education policy on a daily basis (Bessell, 2009b, p.69). In fact, one of the best means of enhancing educational participation 'is not to tell children of their entitlement but to encourage social relations in which children's participation becomes a natural part of their social life' (Wessells, 2005, p.14). It would seem, then, to be critical that children's perspectives are included in discussions about education and educational quality. In fact, 'disregarding the views, experiences and priorities of primary and secondary school students significantly reduces the knowledge base on which good policy and practice can be built' (Bessell, 2009b, p.62).

That said, studies focused on eliciting young people's views on their schools, educational systems and ways their learning can be supported, are *not* widely available, from either minority- or majority-world countries. Rather, international educational discourse tends to cast children and young people as 'beneficiaries of educational services rather than partners or stakeholders' (Bessell, 2009b, p.60).

One of the few such reported studies of students' perspectives on school emanates from the United States (Phelan, et al., 1992). This study involved intensive interviews, classroom observation and analysis of students' records with 54 students in their first year of high school. It sought to identify factors affecting these young people's engagement with schools and learning¹. This research found that U.S. teenagers valued trusting and caring relationships with teachers and students, humour, openness and consideration in a teacher, feeling connected with teachers and knowing that they have thoughts, feelings and experiences that go beyond the academic context, and teachers communicating excitement, enthusiasm and active engagement. They prefer active rather than passive pedagogy and were 'quick to distinguish between teachers who talk with them and those who talk at them'. Students were disdainful of teachers they perceive as being weak in subject-matter knowledge but appreciated when teachers were forthright about their own level of understanding. U.S. students also expressed a strong preference for group work (Phelan, et al., 1992).

Bessell² (Bessell, 2009b; Bessell, Low-McKenzie, & Anise, 2009) conducted a forum with 29 participants aged 12-19 from the Fiji islands, providing a safe space for these young people to discuss their experiences of school and make recommendations on how school experiences could be made positive for all children in Fiji. As is relevant to this study, this work in Fiji focused on creating a foundation for educational policy and practice which is child-centred and progresses the human rights of all children. Forum processes included small group discussions, presentations, priority setting, questioning of Ministry of Education officials, developing a manifesto and delivering their messages to guests from education, social welfare, aid and donor agencies and other similar bodies involved in working with children. Important messages from the process included issues related to corporal punishment, equality and discrimination, teachers' professional standards and relationships with students, and making schooling engaging and fun for young people.

¹ While this U.S. study is of a very different cultural context to this study in Vietnam, its findings may be interesting to contrast with the Vietnamese context.

² Through a collaboration with Save the Children, funded through AusAid and the Crawford School of Economics and Government.

The paucity of research considering education and schooling from the perspectives of children, in either minority or majority work countries reflects the traditional and conservative structures which shape educational systems internationally. However to enact real change, and to achieve equitable, quality outcomes for children and young people, it is now essential to begin to hear their voices.

Sound and responsive educational policies, practice and priorities need to be based not only on statistical data on enrolment, completion and retention rates but on an understanding of issues such as students' experiences of school and the quality of teaching, curricula and educational management (Bessell, 2009b, p.58).

We return to considering these issues specifically as they relate to children in Vietnam, after first considering Vietnam's education system.

2.2 Vietnam's education system

Vietnam, like many South East Asian countries, has seen rapid social and economic change over recent years, change which has brought with it both challenges and opportunities for its education systems. With a population of 83.12 million, 26% of which is living in urban areas (Seel, 2007) and a projected annual population growth rate (2004-2015) of 1.2%, Vietnam faces many challenges in educating its children, with approximately 41% of its population under the age of 18 (ChildFund in Vietnam, 2007).

Vietnam has been making remarkable progress in relation to **alleviating poverty and inequality**, being one of the Asia's fastest growing economies (AusAID, 2003; Chandler & Prasso, 2006). Some hail Vietnam's achievements in this area as 'one of the greatest success stories in economic development' (Harpham, et al., 2004). While approximately 40% of the total population has risen from poverty since 1993 (ChildFund in Vietnam, 2007; Harpham, et al., 2004) poverty alleviation has slowed in recent years, especially in certain regions, and around 17-20 million people still remain in poverty or are only just above the poverty line. Proportionally, many of these people are in remote, rural, minority ethnic areas (AusAID, 2003). The Vietnamese government designates a poor household as one living (in rural areas) on less than 200,000 Vietnamese dong (approx. \$12 Australian) per month (Government statistics), and they designate a commune as poor when more than 40% of its households are living under the national poverty line and the commune lacks basic public infrastructure. Issues of poverty have been (and continue to be) addressed in a range of ways by various organisations. As outlined in the previous section, education is one such focus for poverty alleviation.

In this section we briefly explore historical and contemporary influences on education and educational participation. We then focus specifically on the curriculum and teaching methods used in Vietnamese schools and recent national curriculum development before turning our attention to issues of teacher recruitment, training and professional development.

2.2.1 Historical influences on education in Vietnam

Vietnam has a long history of respect for, and dedication to, education based on Confucian ideals (Giacchino-Baker, 2007, p.90; Woodside, 1983) and the evolution of education in the country reflects Vietnam's complex political and social history. Prior to the French colonial period (i.e. prior to 1875), many Vietnamese had some degree of literacy. However by 1939, the elitist French educational system had left 80 per cent of Vietnam's population illiterate, with only 15 percent of school-age children attending school (Giacchino-Baker, 2007). Between 1946 and 1950, Viet Minh guerrillas, while fighting a major war, taught basic literacy to some ten million 'common people' (binh dan) who were previously uneducated, using night classes and the periods between bombings (Woodside, 1983). Long periods of conflict and war inevitably further strained Vietnam's education system with declines in infrastructure, quality and participation. Remarkably, however, U.S. bombing in 1965 'did not throw the education system into turmoil. On the contrary, the urgency associated with the war effort created pressures within the state to expand education provision' (London, 2006, p.5) and between 1965 and 1975 northern Vietnam saw increased enrolments and staffing levels.

Following unification in 1975, Vietnam experienced educational reform (in 1979) which unified the educational systems in the north and south. The official compulsory schooling age became six to fifteen, a radical break from Confucian tradition of beginning at 8 and from the pragmatic reality that many rural children traditionally did not begin school until 10 or 11 (Woodside, 1983). The national education policy was founded on Ho Chi Minh's philosophy: 'Illiterates must regard study as a right and an obligation; literates are duty bound to teach illiterates; women must all the more study' (Pham 1998, cited in Giacchino-Baker, 2007).

However, once education moved away from volunteer teachers and makeshift facilities to more costly permanent schools, the scale and the rate of development quickly exceeded the Vietnamese economy's capacity to support it (Woodside, 1983). Vietnam has a very young population and in 1981, a quarter of the entire population were of primary and/or middle school age such that the State's education budget was solely consumed by the need to build additional classrooms and prevent the living conditions of teachers from degenerating further (Woodside, 1983). With only part of the funding for school facilities being provided by government, inequities in community resources led to conspicuous differences between rural (often poor) and urban areas, evidenced through the brick and tile schools in the lowlands and thatched-hut schools in the highlands (Woodside, 1983).

Education in Vietnam has derived from **Confucian traditions** which view formal education, learning and academic and intellectual achievement as 'among the noblest human pursuits' (London, 2007). The Confucian emphasis on book-learning and examinations has, however, perpetuated a patriarchal gap between education and farming – between 'leisured male scholars and labouring, uneducated farm women' (Woodside, 1983, p.411). As London (2007, p.416) describes it, 'education has and continues to be viewed not simply or even primarily as a means for personal pursuits, but also requisites for the inculcation of wisdom and rectitude'. London emphasises, however, that this Confucian valuing of education is not to be confused with 'education for all' and that historically, village schools never approximated a coherent formal system of schooling, indicating that as late as the 1940s, Vietnam had only three high schools.

Traditionally there has been resistance to curriculum changes that emphasise technical and job-related training, including vocational or technical schools which were seen as foreclosing entry to high-status occupations. Prejudice of the educated against manual labour meant that, even as late as 1982, those with primary or secondary education were discouraged from staying in rural areas or making contributions to rural life (Woodside, 1983). Even during the war against the French, the Vietnamese communists were torn between creating an egalitarian school system and the desire to train elitist people of talent (Woodside, 1983). It is within this historical context that contemporary initiatives surrounding educational reform and issues surrounding teacher shortages need to be understood.

From 1986, Vietnam experienced extensive market reform (**Doi Moi** – economic renovation) including political, administrative and fiscal decentralisation. Provincial governments were given more responsibility in budgeting and decision-making (Pham Thi Lan & Jones, 2005) and a structure of Local People's Committees (Uy ban nhan dan) was established to work cooperatively with the Communist Party. Doi moi policies also led to significant changes to education systems. From 1990 all education functions became the responsibility of a single entity, the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) and while day-to-day administration of primary education was carried out at district or commune level, secondary education was administered at provincial level (Glewwe & Jacoby, 1998). Central government funded teacher and administrator salaries and scholarships however local governments were required to meet all other costs, including school construction and 'salary enhancements' for teachers (Glewwe & Jacoby, 1998).

Under Doi Moi public education institutions were able (and, in fact, encouraged by the World Bank) to **levy tuition and other fees** (considered further below), leading to increased education costs (Burr, 2006). At the same time, jobs for upper secondary and higher education graduates within the public sector were no longer guaranteed and hence some parents began to question the benefits of their children participating in post-primary education (Liu, 2003). Combined with diminishing quality in education (including deterioration of buildings, scarcity of textbooks, low teacher motivation and morale due to low salaries and the use of double and triple shifts in both primary and secondary schools³) participation in education declined in the late eighties with only partial recovery by the mid nineties (Glewwe & Jacoby, 1998; London, 2006). As indicated by Seel (2007), the process of decentralisation to provincial and district levels in Vietnam, and the accompanying administrative reform, has not gone completely smoothly and there are ongoing problems of accountability, monitoring and of protecting expenditure and ensuring equity. Such issues have led London (2006) to describe the changes in Vietnam's education system as better understood as instances of 'punctuated evolution' rather than fundamental institutional transformation.

³ Double shifts have been used by many developing countries in an attempt to get some schooling to all children but is unanimously considered to have a negative impact on quality, including de-motivating teachers and increasing inequality between schools (that have single versus double shifts) but also within schools (with teachers and pupils being more alert and likely to attend at certain times of the day) (Seel, 2007).

Economic conditions and inequities continue to be the primary cause of education gaps in Vietnam (Giacchino-Baker, 2007). Many claim that doi moi and current educational policies have increased **inequalities** between the rich and poor, between urban and rural populations and between the Kinh majority (90%) and the many minority groups (London, 2006; UNICEF, 2007). Approximately 80% of Vietnam's population live in rural areas and gain their major subsistence from agriculture; 90% of the poorest populations in Vietnam live in these rural areas, with rural per capita income less than half that of the national average (UNICEF, 2007). While national poverty levels have been falling (from 58% in 1993 to 29% in 2002), 69% of the ethnic minority still live in poverty and large numbers of people subsist on incomes only marginally above the poverty line (UNICEF, 2007). Educational performance of children with lower socio-economic backgrounds in these isolated schools has been demonstrated to be significantly lower than those in other areas (Griffin, 2007).

In 2000, 2.4 of the national GDP was allocated to education and the government's target was 5% by 2005 (UNICEF, 2007). Since the 2000 UNESCO/UNICEF conference in Dakar, which established the three education goals of equity, access and quality, Vietnam has had a strong emphasis on implementing the 'education for all' imperative⁴ (Griffin, Nguyen Thi Kim Cuc, Gillis, & Mai Thi Thanh, 2006; Hamano, 2008). The World Bank's 1996 report (cited in Liu, 2003) placed the adult literacy rate at 88% in 1996 and UNICEF cited research placing the 2005 rate for people over 10 years as 96% for males and 90% for females; Seel places the 2007 figures at 90.3%. That said, questions exist regarding the adequacy of conventional data on enrolment trends and state investments in education in providing a clear picture of the state of education provision in Vietnam:

...tracking official statistics on the ebbs and flows in enrolment figures is too crude a method for grasping the realities of education provision... State documents on education, for example, did not call attention to extreme inequalities in the spatial distribution of education provision across regions, the limited scope and quality of schooling, or access to education among different population segments (London, 2006, p.5).

While Vietnam's economy continued to achieve high growth rates from 2001-2005 with political and social stability, most recently (i.e. since late 2007) the **international economic crisis** has strongly affected the development capability and living standards within Vietnam. In particular, remote and disadvantaged areas with unfavourable farming conditions and inadequate infrastructure remain under-developed and have received little investment (Ministry of Planning and Investment, 2009).

Vietnam's government would appear to be committed to improving the quality of education, not least because economic development demands a literate, trained population. The explicit goals of education, as expressed in Vietnam's Education Law, is to:

...educate the Vietnamese into comprehensively developed persons who possess ethics, knowledge, physical health, aesthetic sense and profession, loyal to the ideology of national independence and socialism; to shape and cultivate one's dignity, civil qualifications and competence, satisfying the demands of the construction and defence of the Fatherland (Article 2, "Education Law (Vietnam)," 2005).

2.2.2 Factors affecting participation in education

In 1991 the National Assembly in Vietnam ratified a law making **primary school education (grades 1-5) compulsory** and officially free of charge. This has largely been successful, with Vietnam evidencing a growth from 95% enrolment in primary education in 2000 to 97.5% in 2005 (Hamano, 2008). There have also been significant advances in secondary school education with a doubling in the number of graduates between 1989 and 2007 (Giacchino-Baker, 2007). That said, while school attendance in the early years is quite high the proportion of children leaving school increases significantly after the age of 9. In 2002, 30% of children were not completing the five grades of primary education (Passingham, et al., 2002). At 15 years of age over 60% of children are no longer in school (Liu, 2003).

A wide range of factors affect children's attendance at schools, including: ethnicity, costs; household income; distance to the nearest school; family structure; disability, parental background, occupation and how much they value education as well as the quality of the education available. Children's innate abilities and level of motivation in studying can also influence retention as parents may gain status or respect in their village or community if their

⁴ The "Education for All" (Dakar) goals include (amongst other things) ensuring free and compulsory primary education of good quality; ensuring the learning needs of all young people and adults are met through equitable access to programs; eliminating gender disparities; and improving all aspects of the quality of education so that recognised and measurable learning outcomes are achieved in literacy, numeracy and essential life skills (Seel, 2007).

children do well (Liu, 2003). Confucian values are considered a major influence on girl's continued schooling, with cultural norms emphasising sons' roles in providing for parents in old age, while daughters marry and subsequently provide no support to parents. Almost 70% of girls compared to 50% of boys do not continue in school at aged 15 (Liu, 2003).

Although primary education is, in principle, free it can be **expensive** in reality, with parents contributing toward such things as the construction of school facilities, teachers' salaries, class funds, transcript fees, electricity, notebooks, dormitory bed costs and drinking water (Behrman & Knowles, 1999; Glewwe & Jacoby, 1998; Liu, 2003; UNICEF, 2007). Such education costs can consume an average one quarter of household expenditure per capita (Nguyen, 2006). Costs are also indirect in that children are not able to assist with household duties, family businesses or paid work activities (Feeny & Boyden, 2003b; Kim Cuc Nguyen & Fahey, 2001; Rosati & Tzannatos, 2006). For some of the poorest children, even if they do enrol in school, poor nutrition, ill-health, housework and financial contributions to school may limit their participation (Passingham, et al., 2002). The Vietnamese government has programs in place to subsidise or exempt children of people with meritorious services to the country, policy beneficiaries and poor households from paying school fees (World Bank, 2009). However, Nguyen (2006), emphasised that efforts by central government to subsidise fees in poorer areas have meant that the issues of education cost may be less in these areas than for poorer households in better-off villages, who may be at greater risk of school drop-out.

A number of studies (particularly Truong Si Anh, Knodel, Lam, & Friedman, 1998) have also documented the direct and indirect associations between **family size** and school participation rates. Government policy advocates, and actively promotes through publicity campaigns, family sizes of no more than two children. This policy is aimed at both reducing population growth and raising educational attainment levels by increasing families' ability to keep their children in school longer and the State's ability to expand and staff educational facilities (Truong Si Anh, et al., 1998). Promotional campaigns explicitly state these objectives.

Minority groups (of which there are around 53, representing approximately 13% of the population and nearly 40% of the poor) experience significant educational disadvantage (Truong Huyen Chi, 2009). Reasons are diverse but include lack of financial resources, overcrowding, teacher shortages, language and gender barriers, inability of the education system to meet minority needs, distances of schools from home, responsibilities of older children and, at times, planned differential policies (ChildFund in Vietnam, 2007; Giacchino-Baker, 2007; Molyneux, 1999; Woodside, 1983). Few ethnic minority children are taught by a teacher from their cultural group and almost none in their own language and many teachers in minority areas are less well qualified. Truong Huyen Chi's (2009) research has led him to state that teachers' lack of knowledge of cultural practices of their students 'reflects the selective preservation framework imbued by the Vietnamese state' and that teachers in their research sites commonly held a 'stereotypic observation claiming that Kinh students have a better ability to absorb the teaching than their minority counterparts'.

UNICEF (2007) cite 1999 figures which indicated that while 93.5 Kinh majority boys are enrolled in primary school, only 55% of Ba-na boys and 51.5% of Hmong boys are similarly enrolled. Similarly for girls, 93.4% of Kinh girls were enrolled while only 60.4% of Ba-na girls and 31.5% of Hmong girls attend primary school. The figures are more pronounced for lower secondary education with 65.5% of Kinh boys continuing to secondary (contrasting with 9% of Ba-na boys and 7.5% of Hmong boys) and 64% Kinh girls (contrasting with 8.9% Ba-na girls and 1.6% Hmong girls). Further statistics published by the World Bank (2004, cited in London, 2006) indicate that almost half the 10% of children not attending primary school come from ethnic minority groups. Writing in 2009, Truong Huyen Chi (2009) indicates that despite overall progress, the enrolment of students from ethnic minorities remains lower than that of the majority and their drop-out rate higher.

Disability has also traditionally been a major barrier to education in Vietnam, with a cultural expectation that children with obvious disabilities could not learn (Villa, et al., 2003). Although considered the most educationally inclusive of all Asian countries, and despite a number of policy developments and interventions in some (but not all) provinces, participation rates have generally remained low; 'the vast majority of the one million children with disabilities... receive no education at all or receive services provided in special schools or daycare settings' (Villa, et al., 2003, p.28). National guidelines have been developed for inclusive education (i.e. integration in mainstream classrooms) and this approach is advocated as a preferred service delivery model. However individualising or differentiating instruction is not traditionally (or contemporarily) a feature of teaching methods, and the curriculum's emphasis on knowledge transmission means many children with disabilities are excluded.

2.2.3 Vietnamese curriculum and teaching methods

Traditional educational practices are deeply cultural and continue to have a significant influence on contemporary teaching approaches. **Pedagogies** focus predominantly on rote memorisation, passive learning approaches, print-based knowledge from text books, competition rather than collaboration and an overly academic and theoretical engagement with subject matter (Hamano, 2008; Peyser, et al., 2006; Roxas, 2004; Saito & Tsukui, 2008). Most recently these approaches have been recognised as resulting in poor problem solving skills and creativity, as well as limiting the capacity of students to work independently (Duggan, 2001; Pellini, 2008).

Observations of the dynamics of classroom interactions (Saito, Tsukui, & Tanaka, 2008) highlight the power structures that exist in teachers' views with regard to students, exemplified through actions such as providing orders by banging the desks with objects to create loud noises, as practiced by many teachers. These authors were advised that such practices were acculturated and difficult to change. They also observed and documented what they termed 'evaluative attitudes' toward students and colleagues – a tendency for teachers to express subjective judgements on students and teachers rather than analyse the contexts of actions.

Many also have considered the curriculum as too difficult, with less academic students struggling and frequently leaving (Duggan, 2001). Comments by Fleeny and Boyden (2003b) would seem to apply to the Vietnamese context, that 'the rewards from education are by no means guaranteed, for the skills imparted may not fit those required by the labor market'.

There is currently an average **pupil-teacher ratio** of around 28:1 with higher ratios tending to occur in urban areas (Hamano, 2008). Many schools operate in two (or sometimes even three) shifts of 4 hours across the day, 5 or 6 days a week for around 33 weeks in a year. Many Vietnamese primary students thus receive only a little more than half of the international normal annual teaching input (Tran Thu Ha & Harpam, 2005).

This, no doubt, contributes to the proliferation and culture of '**extra classes**', even among the extremely poor. Although the government has banned extra classes unless they are administered through schools, teachers often run home-based classes to supplement their income, this potentially creates an artificial demand for extra classes by reducing duration and content of standard classes (Tran Thu Ha & Harpam, 2005). London (2006, p.2) describes these extra study classes (*hoc them*) as 'the sprawling informal economy that has grown up within, outside and on the borders of the (nominally) public education system' and notes that this pervasive informal economy is 'in practical terms, as important as the formal school system itself' (p.13). London emphasises that the culture of competitive examinations creates a demand for these extra study sessions after school, before school, on the weekends and during the summer recesses. Tran and Harpam's research (part of the *Young Lives* study) showed that 46% of in-school children were taking extra classes (7% of children in mountainous areas, 56% in rural areas and 58% in urban areas) but that very few minority students were engaged in extra classes. A United Nations report (2005, cited in London, 2006) placed the level of private tutoring at 70% of in-school youth between ages 14-21. Although the government has also attempted to standardise the time quota for legal extra classes (those run by schools) to no more than 2 classes or a maximum of 4 hours a week the *Young Lives* study showed that 90% of children who took extra classes attended for more than the stipulated hours with 58% attending more than 8 hours a week (averaging 7.9 hours in mountainous areas, 8.9 hours in rural and 9.7 hours in urban areas). As a proportion of families' educational expenses extra classes constituted 44% in urban areas while this was closer to 25% in mountainous and rural areas. Interestingly, Tran and Harpam's study indicated that fewer than 10% of children attending extra classes for maths and literature perceived a need for the classes, while 17% of children taking classes in arts or sport subjects had initiated participation themselves.

Traditionally students have needed to 'pass' a year before they **progress** to the following year, such that in 1998 approximately 2.3 million primary and lower secondary children were over-aged for their level, largely because of late initial enrolment and repetition (Passingham, et al., 2002). Again, most of these children were in poorer areas. While the Ministry of Education and Training now encourages lower-achieving students to stay at school by letting them go to the next grade even when performance is poor, as Kim Cic Nguyen's and Fahey's research (2001) reveals, some students in the low achievement classes are charged higher fees.

Prior to 2002 the national **curriculum** was fragmented and overloaded, with students receiving instruction in up to 13 subjects (all in the short school days mentioned above). The curriculum was not based on syllabi establishing learning objectives and outcomes, but rather on the large

number of **text books** used, with the structure, sequence and content of a textbook providing the content and flow of each subject. Each subject had more than one textbook (for example, for years 6-9 there were around 50 textbooks each year) and teachers were locked into rigid and inflexible teaching, with a tight regime of tests and examinations for each grade based on students' knowledge of information in the texts (Duggan, 2001). While acknowledging that good textbooks, if effectively used, are regarded as one of the most important influences on raising student learning in countries where large numbers of teachers are unqualified or underqualified, many developing countries face problems in the development, dissemination and utilisation of textbooks (Chapman & Adams, 2002). For example, in Vietnam, the **supply and cost of textbooks** is largely privatised and prices are considerably higher in rural areas than urban areas. The physical quality of books is poor and few are capable of being used after one year (Duggan, 2001). Every year the Vietnam Education Publishing House issues 1,500 different textbooks, covering all years and curriculum areas (topics) for a total of 90,000,000 units (Gerard and Roegiers, 1997, cited in Peyser, et al., 2006).

Interestingly, Rydstrom (2003) describes how teachers in the commune in which her anthropological research occurred 'monitor the morality in their pupils' homes by paying visits to each household' (p.122). If a child is considered too small for her or his age, dirty, impolite, lazy, not progressing intellectually or does not demonstrate good morality, the teacher will 'teach' the adult family, particularly the female kin 'through a quick lecture about how to bring up the child appropriately' or 'how to help the child advance' (p.122). This is accepted due to the teacher's respected and superior position.

2.2.4 Recent curriculum development and emphasis on quality

Most recently, attention has turned to improving the **quality** of education⁵ and to modernising education through curriculum reform in order to support Vietnam's economic development. This need to re-focus from participation rates to an emphasis on quality of education to ensure that children in school are attaining standards of education similar to other countries was highlighted in the World Bank report on *Localizing MDGs for Poverty Reduction in Viet Nam* (Passingham, et al., 2002).

In 2002 a new primary curriculum was introduced across the country, with iterative implementation beginning with grade 1 in 2002, grade 2 in 2003 and full implementation by 2006. The new curriculum mandates 35 weeks a year of schooling and stipulated that, in addition to Vietnamese, arithmetic and science, that health and physical education and art (drawing and manual arts) would also be compulsory. Foreign languages, information and extracurricular activities are optional in higher grades (Hamano, 2008). Parallel reforms have also occurred in the secondary sector.

The new curriculum promotes '**child-centred learning**', placing children at the centre of the learning process and encouraging children to engage in thinking, class participation, problem-solving and relating knowledge to authentic contexts (Hamano, 2008; Hung Van Dang, 2006). This approach is referred to as Active Teaching Learning (ATL) and contrasts with traditional pedagogies described above. Such approaches have, interestingly, been mandated in Vietnam's 2005 Education Law (Article 5) which states that: 'Methods of education must bring into full play the activeness, the consciousness, the self-motivation, and the creative thinking of learners; foster the self-study ability, the practical ability, the learning eagerness and the will to advance forward'. As highlighted by Roxas (2004) these more authentic and practical approaches to learning may gain greater support from parents since they can see tangible benefits from their children's learning. Examples from interviews with teachers in rural areas included maths and language activities focusing on crop production, fertiliser use and brick-laying.

Again, while Vietnam's primary enrolment rate is quite high, the quality of education can also be considered in relation to **duration and length of schooling experience**. Vietnam's primary education is 5 years while other countries have six or seven years of primary education, and the 35 week school year (as increased from the previous 33 week) is also still below international norms of 40 weeks. Further, only around 20% of children receive full-day schooling (5-6 hours). Most primary students, especially those in rural areas, receive approximately half the international norm for annual teaching time (Passingham, et al., 2002)

⁵ The notion of 'quality' in education in developing countries has been explored by Chapman and Adams (2002) and commonly inferred connections between level of student achievement on selected portions of national curriculum as the default measure of 'quality' is problematised.

While curriculum reform may be a positive step, Duggan (2001) highlights the **potential for ongoing inequities**, reminding about the 'textbook rush' in 1994 where the supply of textbooks was inadequate and parents were unable to source essential resources, particularly in rural areas. Traditional wide variation in quality improvement between rural and urban areas, due to internal inefficiencies, may mean that the curriculum reform may not benefit those areas in greatest need in improvements in education for some time (Duggan, 2001). In the context proposed for this research, such inequalities are already quite evident (ChildFund in Vietnam, 2008).

A further challenge to the implementation of change is the **continuing focus on exams**, meaning that 'a huge conflict exists between the ideological foundation of child-centred education and the present evaluation system' (Saito, et al., 2008, p. 98). Teachers and schools fear losing ranking in exam processes, and inspectors employed by authorities are also viewed as conservative (Saito & Tsukui, 2008).

Interestingly, Vietnam also has a high level of political **commitment to adopting global frameworks for sustainable development** and have endorsed both the Agenda 21 principles agreed by world leaders and the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development 2005-2015, with education being one of the eight priority areas. Education for Sustainable Delivery 'fosters values and promotes skills needed to face the challenges of a changing world and contributes to creating a more sustainable future. It recognizes that learning is connected to all stages of life and occurs in different spaces besides formal education' (Pellini, 2008, p.10). Vietnam's new Education Development Strategy for 2008-2020 embraces these perspectives. Some measures listed as part of this strategy include:

...to change from passive knowledge transmission... to advising learners on the ways of active thinking and receiving knowledge, to teach students the methods of self-learning, systematic collection of information and of analytic and synthetic thinking... to increase the active independent attitude of students in learning process and self-management of the activities at schools and in social work (Pellini, 2008, p.11).

Implementation of the new child-centred approaches represent a **major change** in the mindset and pedagogical practices of teachers (Hamano, 2008) and curriculum reform has been cumbersome, time-consuming and complex (Duggan, 2001). Given that lower secondary teachers are trained to specialise in only one subject, reduction in subject numbers has been a sensitive issue and MOET has been particularly concerned to enlist their support and cooperation, together with close collaboration and involvement of a range of educational agencies, subject committees, universities and provincial education directors and offices. Promotion of creativity has also been identified as a difficulty for teachers in traditionally Confucian countries (Kwang & Smith, 2004). Seel (2007) points out, it is a major challenge to support teachers (particularly older teachers) to take on new ideas and practices, as teachers risk 'losing face' if the children become over-excited and unruly or if the new teaching approaches are perceived as too culturally alien.

Being a teacher tends to be recognised as having the authority and responsibility to 'teach right things' to children; further, a teacher is perceived as the only person who knows the truth and the right answers in a classroom as one who guides innocent students ... Therefore, teachers tend to maintain their authority over children and have evaluative viewpoints towards them (Saito & Tsukui, 2008, p.573).

Change is, in some part, being made through the **re-writing of text books**, which remain a dominant focus in the education process. Peyser, Gerard and Roegier's (2006) describe their experimental work implementing a 'pedagogy of integration' through the development of a 4th grade text for the social and natural sciences. The new text was viewed as scaffolding teachers in their pedagogical development as it offered concrete tips in how to de-compartmentalise their teaching, and provide stimulus for interaction with students, thus changing the roles of teachers from content deliverers to organisers and discussion moderators. As such it was seen as potentially inspiring teachers to apply these methods in other discipline areas. These authors describe these changes in approach to curriculum as representing a true culture shock, with feedback, although positive, indicating the need to 'Vietnamize' the process. Interestingly, 'after a month's experience... students were reluctant to work under the 'old' methods, even when this applied for other subject matters' (Peyser, et al., 2006, p.48).

While acknowledging that their study documented the situation in a particular point in time and that their findings should not be considered perpetual or prolonged, Saito, Tsukui and Tanaka's research (Saito, et al., 2008) concluded that:

Although the governmental policies pertaining to the curriculum are entitled 'child-centred education', there existed a huge gap between the policies and the actual practices. In reality, children, who need to be at the centre of the educational policies and practices were still oppressed and regarded as marginal. Moreover, there was a severe lack of trust among colleagues in schools despite the fact that it was imperative to develop teacher collegiality... In sum, based on what was observed, primary schools tended to be institutions which would lack a certain amount of care and concern pertaining to the students. Instead, they were more likely to be institutions conducive to evaluative classification and competition (Saito, et al., 2008, p.102).

2.2.5 Teacher recruitment, training and professional development

The role of 'teacher' in Vietnamese society is highly respected but very poorly paid. As Rydstrom (2003, p.120) describes, 'Being a teacher is seen as a life's mission and is rendered meaningful because of the role an educated person has historically held (and currently holds) in Vietnamese society'. Vietnamese teachers are predominantly female, in part because the **low salaries** do not make primary teaching an attractive career. Funding for teachers' salaries is predominantly from governments however where finances are not available to employ sufficient teachers some receive salaries from local finance (sometimes referred to as the 'socialisation of education') or other non-government subsidies (Hamano, 2008).

Vietnam faces a **shortage** in primary teachers but a surplus in secondary teachers (Duggan, 2001). A major issue facing Vietnam is that teachers are reluctant to take positions in rural areas due to high living and travel costs and the linguistic and cultural diversity in these areas, together with a lack of transfer processes, meaning that once appointed it is difficult to transfer to other locations (Hamano, 2008). 'Many volunteers or unqualified teachers with poor instructional skills are now teaching in remote classrooms. Low salaries resulting in high rates of turnover and absenteeism compound the dilemma' (Giacchino-Baker, 2007, p.171). In fact, Burr (2006, p.44) has stated that 'Teachers' salaries are so low that they are frequently unable to survive unless their incomes are subsidized by money given to them by children's families'. Greater attempts are being made to recruit teachers from rural locations.

Teacher Training Institutes (TTIs) are established in every province and provide two, three and/or four year qualifications. The minimum requirement for qualification is to have completed 12 years of general schooling and then two years at a TTI (12+2). Pre-service training programs have been progressively extended in duration and focus has been placed on developing their quality. The Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) is attempting to raise the levels to 12+3 or 12+4 or to a university bachelor level and TTIs are gradually shifting to bachelor qualifications. However in many provinces teachers are practicing with 9+3 or 5+3 and there is an urgent need to upgrade their qualifications. Some provinces are recommending that such teachers retire (Hamano, 2008). In Bac Kan Province, the focus for this study, 4% of teachers have 12+4 or higher; 11.2% 12+3; 77.3% 12+2; 6.6% 9+3; 1% under 9+3 (Hamano, 2008). According to Hamano (2008) teacher training remains strongly oriented on theory and is primarily conducted through lecture-style delivery and with an emphasis on teaching from text books (Duggan, 2001). International aid for teacher training is currently provided through The World Bank (which has focused on the development of teacher professional standards and teacher training materials), the Belgian Technical Corporation (which focuses on teacher training in seven provinces in northern areas, with a focus on ATL) and the Japan International Cooperation Agency (which focuses on cluster training and school-based training, and strengthening the abilities of administrators).

A range of issues are evident in the **quality of teaching**, particularly in some areas of Vietnam. Studies of **teacher competence** in reading and mathematics indicate considerable disparities related to provincial location, with lower levels of skill among both teachers and pupils in isolated schools with low socio-economic backgrounds (Griffin, 2008). Inadequate teacher training has resulted in ineffective teaching methodologies and primary teacher training does not tend to include training in methods for teaching different ages or subjects and supervision of teachers is inadequate. Pre-schools are not required to have full-time teachers and employ contractual teachers with even less formal teacher training, or none at all (ChildFund Australia, 2008).

In 2000, work commenced on the development of **teacher standards** for Vietnam, placing attention on teacher performance rather than time in service, which represented a radical shift in thinking and an extended period of promotion and acceptance (Griffin, et al., 2006).

The substantial changes occurring in the Vietnamese education sector have brought a subsequent need for significant teacher education. **In service training** (INSET) is currently the focus of policy initiatives and these programs include summer training, qualification improvement training, demo lesson training and in-school training, with an objective to upgrade all primary teachers from 12+2 to 12+3. Expenses for this training are borne by the trainees themselves and training is conducted on weekends and hence is not readily available to all teachers. While teacher quality is critically important in enhancing educational quality, improvements in teacher quality require more training in pedagogical skills and academic content, with teachers' attitudes, values and practices being critical in teacher empowerment. Chapman and Adam's report (2002) emphasises the importance of dealing with issues such as low self-esteem of teachers, motivation, remuneration, absenteeism and resistance to educational innovation and change:

Teachers... who have, themselves, been subject to traditional styles of learning at school and in their training, will not change the authoritarian styles and rote learning in their teaching by being taken through yet another [traditional] training program (Morley, 1997, cited in Chapman & Adams, 2002).

Initiatives conducted jointly by the Vietnamese government and the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) have documented a range of issues associated with implementing collegial classroom-based observation and reflection as a form of teacher professional development and means of building a 'learning community' culture (Saito & Tsukui, 2008; Saito, et al., 2008). As highlighted by these authors, teachers' views tend to be very conventional and teachers fear being held accountable for not conducting lessons considered appropriate by authorities (Saito & Tsukui, 2008). Teachers in these studies were focused on teaching methods and reluctant to perceive the need to challenge their beliefs about students' learning. While teachers can participate in training focused on child-centred education, their daily teaching tends to remain unchanged (Saito & Tsukui, 2008). Seel (2007) also highlighted that long-term support to whole school staff teams is required.

2.3 Children and childhood in Vietnam

Vietnam has a young population, with approximately 41% of its population of 82 million under the age of 18 (ChildFund in Vietnam, 2007) and more than a quarter under the age of 15 (Truong Huyen Chi, 2009)⁶. In this section we explore some of the social and cultural influences on children and childhood in Vietnam. In particular we focus on ideas regarding children's rights and children's agency before focusing particularly on research involving consultation with Vietnamese children.

2.3.1 Social and cultural influences

Children's development is deeply cultural and culture informs the meanings members of any social group, including children themselves, give to the experience of childhood (Dawes & Donald, 2005a). Cultural values and life goals are a very important mediating force in human experience and have a major influence on aspirations and expectations (Feeny & Boyden, 2003b). All communities have different understandings of what is 'good' for children, which may or may not reflect mainstream Western models. Understanding cultural perspectives on children and childhood is critical to shaping and conducting a culturally respectful and appropriate research study. As Burr warns:

Vietnam has historically experienced a hard battle with outsiders intent on reshaping and taking over its territory... Contemporary Vietnam is being invaded in a more subtle but nevertheless nefarious manner, this time by cultural hijackers intent on, among other objectives, introducing children in the region to a new set of values and expectations, without necessarily first doing the groundwork to find out why they follow their current lifestyles (Burr, 2006, p.25).

Vietnamese perspectives on children and childhood are influenced by Confucianism, which emphasises that relationships within families are always hierarchical, with the person in the position of superiority showing guidance, love and care for inferiors, and those inferiors obeying their superiors. As described by Le Thi Dan Dung (2008), the core value of filial piety means that children must respect and obey their parents and parents have absolute power over children. Family life is thus, traditionally, hierarchical with wives obeying their husbands and children obeying their parents. Younger siblings obey older ones and the firstborn son has a

⁶ UNICEF places the number of children at 36% but are unclear about age groups included.

higher status than other boys who follow but also responsibilities to continue to live with his parents after marriage and to maintain the family ancestral worship table (Burr, 2006).

Respect occupies a key role in the value systems of Vietnamese people, and is deeply embedded in cultural practices and the language itself. In the context of school, *thay* ('teacher') is one of the most important pronouns and, as part of the compounds *thay giao* or *thay hoc*, mean both 'teacher' and 'master' in the sense of 'master of a servant' (Bankston & Hidalgo, 2006). The emphasis on moral development also implies that teachers should not merely be effective instructors who transmit information accurately, but also for teachers to serve as moral exemplars for students to emulate and toward whom they should show meekness and obedience (Kwang & Smith, 2004)

Culturally, parents in Vietnam decide almost every aspect of their children's life and have a significant influence on them [indicated through the Vietnamese saying 'Bo me dat dau con ngoi do' or 'Children must sit wherever their parents put them'] (Liu, 2003). According to Confucianism a Vietnamese child is not allowed to participate in adult's talk and must be obedient. In schools, children are expected to offer their teachers the same respect as a ruler or father and criticising teachers or parents is normally not accepted (Trang Le Truong & Fisher, 1997). There is thus a traditional and deep-rooted attitude of shaping child-related policies based on adults' experiences and limited skills in working with children (Pham Thi Lan & Jones, 2005, p.6). That said, there is increasing recognition of the importance of consulting with, and encouraging the participation of, children, both in research and service delivery, as well as policy formation.

Rydstrom (2006) highlights the **gender dynamics** traditionally inherent in Vietnamese culture. The influence of Confucianism emphasises patrilineal ancestor worship and the celebration of male progeny, and men are inherently assumed to be superior to women. There is a strong moral obligation on superiors to educate the inferior and to show love, affection and care, with the inferior required to obey superiors and demonstrate gratitude and piety (Rydstrom, 2006). Men are usually the head of the household and make important decisions while day-to-day household decisions are made by women. The male head of the family has absolute power over all family members, with children and wives being completely subservient (Volkman, 2005). Relationships between women and their sons/grandsons are complex because their own position is determined as inferior to males. Relationships between female teachers and male students are also, thus, culturally complex. Rydstrom (2003) explains that children, but particularly girls are perceived as like 'white pieces of paper' (a traditional metaphor – *Cac chau [nhu]mot to giay trang*) – in need of being inscribed with good moral values and socialised into society (*xa hoi hoa* – to be turned into society). Family is seen as having a major role in relation to a child's socialisation, but so too does school as an institution, and teachers in particular.

The State plays a major role in shaping attitudes and approaches to children. Prompted by concern about the growing population and health and nutrition, the Family Planning Law of 1988 set two children as the family limit and Vietnamese have been advised to space births three to five years apart. Minority groups, however, have freedom to have more children. A preference for male children leads to instances of abortion and abandonment and in some instances infanticide (Burr, 2006).

Recognising the importance of the upbringing of its youth to the nation's future, the Vietnamese government has been investing considerably in the current generation. Between 2001-2006 funds for national targeted education programs increased five times and the annual budget for education trebled, representing 23% of the state's total expenditure in 2006 (Truong Huyen Chi, 2009). In particular a range of programs, including scholarships and subsidies, have been targeted toward ethnic minority children.

Within this historical and cultural context **rapidly changing values** such as market economy, individual interests, citizen's rights, freedom and democracy and tolerance and acceptance of differences are shaping youth culture (UNICEF, 2007). Such rapid change has resulted in many youth becoming involved in high-risk behaviour such as crime, drug use, prostitution, gambling, unsafe sex and so on⁷. Reductions in state subsidies and rising costs of social services have increased pressures on men, women and children to earn money, prompting migration from rural areas and disrupting traditional family structures (Volkman, 2005). Burr warns that it is wrong to assume that Confucian values have an overriding influence over all Vietnamese children's lives and such assumptions can lead to misunderstandings by outsiders.

⁷ Data from a 2003 Survey Assessment of Vietnamese Youth (SAVY) is detailed at length by UNICEF (2007).

2.3.2 Children's rights in Vietnam

Vietnam was the second country in the world and the first country in the South-East Asia region to ratify the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in the early 1990s (Pham Thi Lan & Jones, 2005; Rydstrom, 2006). The Vietnamese National Programmes of Action for Children 1991- 2000 and 2001-2010 were:

... aimed at creating optimum conditions to meet the needs and basic rights of children, to prevent and reduce the dangers of harming children, and to build a safe and healthy environment for Vietnamese children so they can be protected, cared for, educated and develop to their optimum potential. The program sets specific, time-bound objectives in relation to children's health, nutrition, and education, access to clean water and environmental hygiene, cultural and recreation activities... It includes specific targets in relation to care for orphans, rehabilitation and treatment for disabled children, and reductions in the number of childhood injuries and accidents, street children, children engaged in hazardous labour, sexual abuse and trafficking, children addicted to drugs, crimes committed by children, and children infected by HIV (UNICEF, 2007, p.10).

Television programs, children's rights clubs, annual meetings between children and government officials and advocacy activities of the Youth Union and the incorporation of UNCRC into the school curriculum have all been aimed at raising awareness of children's rights.

Yet despite strong political will, some claim that the implementation of the UNCRC has not followed a coherent and holistic approach and child participation has not been accorded equal emphasis with provision and protection (Pham Thi Lan & Jones, 2005, p.5). A number of **issues**, for example, have been highlighted by UNICEF. The 'increasing gap in living standards due to the shift to a market economy, rapid urbanization, family break-ups, and the erosion of traditional values have led to an increased number of abandoned, neglected, abused and exploited children' (UNICEF, 2007, p.8). Social work has not been recognised as a profession and there are no designated, qualified social workers at the grassroots level to deal with child protection issues. Social welfare and child protection are charitable rather than rights-based concerns, reliant on voluntary efforts and NGOs.

Migration from rural to urban areas is significant with a higher proportion of female to male migrants. Many children and youth are pressured by parents to migrate for employment or do so due to absolute poverty and the need to seek employment. Children in such situations often take on the role of primary breadwinner for the family (UNICEF, 2007).

Vietnamese children **contribute considerably to the economy** and many children combine schooling with work and/or housework. The Vietnam Living Standards Survey 1992-93 showed that 60% of children participate in work and housework activities while in school (cited in Liu, 2004). This same study showed that 34.6% of children were engaging in school and housework and 15.7% in school, housework *and* work (considered wage employment, helping on a household farm or business). Of those children not in school 16.4 were engaged in work, 58.4% in work and housework and 19.7% engaged in housework only. Only 5.5% of this group were not involved in any form of work (Liu, 2004).

The contradictions between ideals of non-violent behaviour expressed in Vietnam's ratification of UNCRC and the continuing use of **corporal punishment** by fathers and grandfathers with their sons and grandsons in Vietnam are highlighted by Rydstrom (2006). Culturally, the head of the household has the 'right' to discipline and 'bring up' or 'educate' junior male kin. Because of women's inferior position a mother or grandmother only rarely beats her son or grandson because it would challenge the position of the head of her household. Codes for punishment have been developed in local communities and provide guidelines for men indicating when a beating is acceptable and when it becomes abuse.

It is important to acknowledge that UNCRC, while a very positive international initiative, is based on Western assumptions about child development and children's rights and that, when applied in non-Western developing countries, can be problematic (Burr, 2006; Dawes & Donald, 2005a, 2005b; Feeny & Boyden, 2003a; Le Thi Dan Dung, 2008). Human rights laws are based on a Western philosophy that emphasises the autonomy of individuals which is in contrast with countries, such as Vietnam, with an emphasis on collective responsibility (Burr, 2006). As argued by Le Thi Dan Dung (2008), human rights can only become reality when applied by countries within their own traditions, history and legal systems and hence a multicultural approach to rights is required.

The particular context of 'rights' in Vietnamese society is explored in some depth by Volkmann (2005), who similarly argues that rights-based programming requires a very good

understanding of the historical and political environment of a country in order to identify the most appropriate entry points for rights-based projects and activities.

Burr (2006) describes that when the UNCRC was introduced in Vietnam it immediately took precedence over existing policies on childhood, without either the Vietnamese government or UNICEF attempting to reconcile the differences that existed. She speaks of Vietnam's National Law for Children: The Law on Child Protection, Care and Education (August 12, 1991), Article 13.1 of which is 'to show love, respect and piety toward grandparents and parents, politeness toward adults, affection toward younger children and solidarity with friends'. Burr highlights that the emphasis in Vietnamese policy and practice on the child taking responsibility for his or her actions is absent in UNCRC. She goes on to claim that the tendency to introduce concepts of rights by practitioners who are not familiar with Vietnamese ideas of rights and selfhood has created 'a failing that was not so much about cultural misunderstanding as about operating with imperialistic notions of power' (Burr, 2006, p.17). Burr views the participatory elements of UNCRC as causing the most contention and confusion globally, and particularly in Vietnam's hierarchical society.

Burr's work highlights the tensions and inconsistencies existing within and between NGOs in relation to rights, claiming that many local officials and charity workers do not fully support or understand children's rights agendas and that NGO workers are inconsistent and ambiguous in their support for particular aspects of UNCRC (Burr, 2006). In fact, Burr's research with children in Vietnam led her to conclude that:

...In the Vietnamese context, this gap between theoretically informed treatment of the child, practitioner-based policies and the experiences of children has added to the failure of child rights aid programs to achieve their goals (p.3).

Volkman's (2005) exploration of the evolution of family, women's and children's rights over time in Vietnam leads to a discussion of participation. Traditionally, Volkman argues, neither parents nor children were accustomed to discussing issues of relevance with each other, nor would parents usually listen to the opinions of children:

Even today, families tend to over-protect their children rather than to encourage them to make up their own minds, reach their own decisions, and broaden their experience – although the latter is something practised among highly educated families in which parents tend to listen more to their children (Volkman, 2005, p.40).

2.3.3 Consultation in research with children in Vietnam

It needs to be noted that it is very difficult to identify what research might have been conducted in Vietnam and reported in Vietnamese. We have been advised that such research is very limited and that very little research has been conducted by Vietnamese nationals which takes account of the views of children. Advice has, however, been somewhat contradictory as we have also been advised that several Vietnamese universities *are* involved in research projects with children, particularly related to the education of minority students.

In many Asian countries such as Vietnam, parents decide almost every aspect of their children's lives (Liu, 2003) and there is a traditional and deep-rooted attitude of shaping child-related policies based on adults' experiences and limited skills in working with children (Pham Thi Lan & Jones, 2005). Rarely are children's perspectives on poverty or education heard and, since traditional discourse around poverty is based on adult ideas and assumptions, it is unknown whether children share the same priorities (Feeny & Boyden, 2003b). Reports of research, particularly educational research, taking account of children's perspectives (or at least those reported in English), are few and far between. In this section we attempt to provide a brief overview of those studies which have been located and relevant findings from these regarding consultation with children.

An early study by Trang Le Truong and Fisher (1997) focused on mathematics education, and highlighted the **cultural sensitivities** involved in consulting with children when conducting research in Vietnam. These authors provide examples from their own research of the care needed in phrasing questions such that students are not seen as criticising their teachers and the importance of anonymity. They also suggest that researchers talk to teachers, asking them to encourage students to give their real opinions (Trang Le Truong & Fisher, 1997).

Another study by Kim Cuc Nguyen and Fahey (2001) incorporated interviews with children (of both high and lower achievement levels) as to the reasons why they left school early or have continued with their studies. These qualitative case studies paint a rich picture of the issues facing children in their school attendance, including the complex interplay of family circumstances and misfortune, economic issues, interest and relevance of schooling, gender (including preparation for marriage), and employment prospects, and parental attitudes toward staying in school (Kim Cuc Nguyen & Fahey, 2001). As such the study challenges assumptions about simple relationship between school achievement and retention.

Rydstrom's (2003) anthropological study focuses on morality and childhood in the rural northern Vietnamese commune of Tinh Tri. As she explains, in 1994 when she began her research, it was both unusual and controversial for foreigners to gain permission to conduct field research and, she claims, it remains difficult to do so. Focusing on cultural issues concerning children, family and gender compounded suspicion around her work as did what she terms the 'Marxist quantitative sociology which pervades northern Vietnamese social science' leading to a perception that anthropological ways of collecting data were a 'waste of time' (p.xiv).

Another of the limited number of studies involving interviews with children is Le's (2004) research with 'street kids'. This study was interested in young people's capacity to learn English and Western cultural understandings from tourists while selling memorabilia.

Rachael Burr's research (2002; 2006) focused on the experiences of children who work on the streets of Hanoi. Her work led to a critical analysis of the rights agenda and the work of some international NGOs in Vietnam (as explored in Section 2.3.2).

Harpham and colleagues' (2004) study of children's perceptions of the causes and consequences of child poverty in rural Vietnam illustrates the importance of understanding poverty from the perspective of children themselves. This study involved children through drawing, creating schedules of their daily activities, creating 'mobility maps' of the places they go and Venn diagrams of the influential forces in their communities, and group discussions. The study documented the burden of education and health fees on child poverty.

Giacchino-Baker's (2007) study of educational issues facing ethnic minorities in Vietnam involved interviews with children and young people. Methodologically this study was interesting in that interviews were conducted in Vietnamese with responses translated into English by an interpreter. Responses were recorded in both Vietnamese (by the researcher/interpreter) and in English (by the US researcher) with notes being reviewed for accuracy and analysed by both researchers after the interview. This study documented critical shortages of ethnic minority teachers and a desperate need for teachers who understood children's language and culture.

One of the most significant contemporary studies seeking to include children and young people's perspectives on schooling in Vietnam is that currently being conducted by **Young Lives** (www.younglives.org.uk). This 15-year, longitudinal study focuses on four developing countries and involves some 2000 children (aged 1-14) from Vietnam being surveyed at 3-4 year intervals and a further 1000 Vietnamese children being followed from the age of 8 years (Young Lives, 2009). The study has a key focus on poverty alleviation and reduction⁸ and an overarching hypothesis is that children denied access to education or health services are more likely to reside in households deprived of other basic infrastructure and therefore likely to suffer from cumulative disadvantage (Lyytikainen, et al., 2006).

A sub-study from the Young Lives project, conducted by Pham Thi Lan and Jones (2005) developed and implemented two innovative methods for empowering children to articulate their own perspectives on poverty and solutions to tackle its multiple dimensions. The first, *Children's Fora*, provided an opportunity for young people aged 10-15 from diverse family circumstances to develop creative presentations to convey their views to policy-makers. The second method, the *Young Journalist Clubs*, enabled children to develop writing and photography skills and present their work on national and regional radio and in print media. These initiatives were jointly implemented by Voice of Vietnam and the Youth Union. Pham Thi Lan and Jones's research also had a strong focus on **capacity building**, which included statistical literacy for local policy-makers, education for teachers and children about children's rights as citizens, and capacity building for children so that they could better articulate their experiences of poverty.

Another Young Lives sub-study in Vietnam is documented by Truong Huyen Chi (2009, c2009). This study supplemented the Young Lives survey data with qualitative research with 23

⁸ Notably the Young Lives project did *not* focus on the Province proposed for the ChildFund Project (i.e. Bac Kan).

Vietnamese children, including those from Kinh (the majority), as well as Hmong and H'Roi ethnic minority children. This project involved a team of five anthropologists staying with each child's family for a week, sometimes working through interpreters, but providing the opportunity to more closely explore children's experiences and own views. This research documented children's experiences of adversity, and their perspectives on issues surrounding their participation in school, particularly related to issues impacting on ethnic minority children.

Most recently, a National Children's Forum (Ministry of Labor - Invalids and Social Affairs, 2010) was hosted in Vietnam as a joint initiative between the Ministry of Labor and a number of international NGOs including UNICEF, Plan, Save the Children, ChildFund, and World Vision. This large scale participatory initiative was held to promote children's right to participation in the policy making process and the development of legal frameworks and a National Plan of Action for Children 2011-2020. Its methodology was highly innovative in that it allowed leaders of the Communist Party and the Government to meet and interact with children and to listen to their concerns and expectations relating to the main themes of health and sanitation, education and recreation and child protection. The process involved a series of provincial children's forums held in 21 cities and provinces where young people, facilitated by trained adults, exchanged ideas, identified methods to reveal and explain problems and issues (such as drawings, role plays, posters and displays) and developed messages and recommendations. These were then used as the basis for a National Children's Forum which involved 126 children and 42 facilitators from these locations. The Forum took the form of a summer camp and involved groups forming around six themes.

Through this Forum a wide range of social issues relevant to children and young people were identified, including issues of: poverty; 'street children'; living conditions; environmental sustainability; animal cruelty; world peace; safe places to play; childhood injury (including from the residual effects of dioxin poisons from the use of Agent Orange); relationships with families; discipline; gender discrimination; and the harmful effects of games and the internet. To focus specifically on the outcomes from this participatory process in relation to education, children from Thanh Hoa focused on issues of quality of education and stated that the 'achievement disease' in studying needs to be uprooted (Ministry of Labor - Invalids and Social Affairs, 2010, p.21). Similarly, children from Hung Yen performed a role play about the emphasis on school performance, with the key message to 'stop cheating in examinations and stop the performance race in schools'. Interestingly, an official from the Department of Student Affairs, in addressing the children at the Forum, spoke of MOET's priority to increase quality of education provision and also to encourage students to learn more independently, which was described as 'the modern method replacing extra classes' (Ministry of Labor - Invalids and Social Affairs, 2010, p.57).

Consultation regarding future visions of education

The studies cited above represent the limited, but diverse number of studies involving consultation with Vietnamese children and young people. Most are focused on aspects of children's life experiences, particularly related to their experiences of poverty. However a specific focus might now turn to the small number of recent studies focused directly on eliciting children's perspectives of their schools and schooling, and their visions for the future of education in their country.

Truong Tra Son Luu's (2008)'s study was one of the few located (and reported in English) considering children's visions for the future of education. This research was conducted in two rural districts within 200km of Ho Chi Minh City and involved drawing-elicitation interviewing with children from ethnic minority groups. The study documented issues of corporal punishment, long distances travelled to school and language difficulties for these children learning Vietnamese as a second language. The 'dream-schools' drawn by children are profound in conveying deep understandings of the challenges these children face in their schooling.

Two **Vietnamese secondary students' views and visions** for the future of education in Vietnam were expressed through the 2000 SEAMEO - MOE Thailand Sister School Programme: Education for the Future Symposium⁹. These presentations (Lee Hong Hua & Tran Long Nhat, 2000) provide a powerful illustration of the potential for engaging students in considering and expressing their own future visions for educational change and improvement. These students demonstrate deep awareness of the issues and limitations facing the Vietnamese education system (including matters of quality, retention, equity, pedagogy and curriculum). Notably, Mr Tran Long Nhat (amongst a range of other considerations) visioned

⁹ Available from <http://www.seameo.org/vl/library/dl/welcome/projects/sisterth/vnrpt.htm>

students being encouraged to 'take on the role of teacher – in giving presentations within class, allowing for student peers to comment and discuss, while under the supervision of a qualified teacher' and Miss Lee Hong Hua spoke of the need for improved quality of, and equitable access to, textbooks and greater support and recognition of teachers. The importance of seeking the views of children and young people is powerfully expressed in Lee Hong Hoa speech:

...we are entering a new millennium, a new century with many dreams of a perfect education, an ideal teacher and ideal textbooks. We have the right to dream and believe that our dreams can come true. Let's dream for our education (Lee Hong Hoa, 12th grade student, 2000).

2.4 Children's participation in research

Given that the key focus of this research was to better understand children's experiences of learning and schooling it was most appropriate that the research assumed a participatory, child-focused approach. In this section we provide an overview of the literature related to children's participation in research and how this informed the conceptualisation, planning and implementation of this particular study.

2.4.1 Positioning children as a focus for research

Contemporary socio-cultural and postmodern perspectives acknowledge that children and childhood are worthy of investigation in their own right and that children are knowledgeable, competent experts on their own lives, possessing perspectives that are best gained from children themselves (Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth and NSW Commission for Children and Young People, 2009; Einarsdottir, 2007).

More than ever before, children are viewed as social agents whose views and perspectives are deemed critical in the creation of social institutions (families, schools, legal systems and the like) that are responsive to them. From a sociological perspective, children are now regarded as subjects, not objects, of research reflecting a significant shift away from traditional conceptions of children as irrational, incompetent, vulnerable and unable to know their own best interests (James & Prout, 1997). From a human rights perspective, involving children in research vindicates the right of children to have a say and to be heard, as afforded to them under the UNCRC. As Grover (2004, p.90) argues:

Allowing children to be active participants in the research process enhances their status as individuals with inherent rights to participation in society more generally and the right to be heard in their authentic voice.

From a *socio-cultural perspective*, including children in research reflects a view of children as active and dynamic, whose ability to be a citizen does not emerge with biological growth, but is nurtured by social experiences and interactions with others (Neal, 2004). Research is thus understood to be a collaborative process which acknowledges the active role of children in their development while, at the same time, recognising that the potential of the collaboration is influenced by the individual characteristics of research participants, interpersonal factors and the broader historical and cultural context of the research setting (Tudge & Hogan, 2005).

Research that is done *with* children rather than *on* or about them (Smart, et al., 2001) is critically important in elevating children's voices into the spheres of public policy and practice, where planning and decisions concerning their lives are largely determined. Yet studies focused on eliciting young people's views on their schools, educational systems and ways their learning can be supported generally are not widely reported, despite the fact that 'students have a great deal to say about school and classroom conditions that influence what they do, how they feel about themselves as students, and how they perceive their school as an educational and social setting' (Phelan, et al., 1992, p.696). Children's participation in educational and community development research contexts is thus crucial in ensuring that policy is sensitive and responsive to their needs and therefore more likely to work.

Informing the research was Rasmussen's (2004) distinction between 'places for children' and 'children's places'. As Rasmussen's research has shown, studying the everyday lives of children can uncover examples of children relating to places ('children's places') which are not identical with 'places for children'. Applying these concepts specifically to learning experiences, we sought to explore the environments and contexts where learning occurs which are meaning for children themselves – whether these be institutional or non-institutional. Such an approach, it was felt, could 'help adults become more attentive and responsive to places that engage children, physically and emotionally and encourage educators and teachers to scrutinize their

own institutional settings and expand their understandings of “children’s places” ‘ (Rasmussen, 2004).

Given this focus, research methods which directly focus on eliciting children’s perspectives were seen as most appropriate.

2.4.2 Methodological considerations in conceptualising this research

The question of how children can be involved in research remains contested ground, primarily because it is an intrinsically ethical endeavour that implicates researchers at every level of the research process.

The impetus to involve children in this research reflects a commitment to better understanding and describing Vietnamese children’s experiences of learning and of education in their immediate context. It assumes that they are persons of value, their experiences are of interest to themselves, and to others, and that they have a valuable contribution to make to the matter under investigation (Neal, 2004; Smart, 2006; Smith, 2007a; Taylor, 2006b). However, in seeking children’s participation in the research, and respecting and promoting their entitlement to ‘have a say’, we acknowledged the ways in which participation is deeply implicated within broader social and cultural considerations.

Mannion (2007) cautions that children’s voices may be scripted by adults, or by other deeply embedded social or cultural considerations, and that adults should be mindful *not* to assume they have heard all that children are trying to say. Such a view signals the critical importance of *recognition and respect* which, as Taylor (1995, p.226) argues, are ‘vital human needs’ and hence integral to children’s wellbeing and positive development (Fitzgerald, Graham, Smith, & Taylor, 2009; Graham & Fitzgerald, accepted 2010; Honneth, 1995).

Problematising issues of consent (including issues of third person consent from parents, teachers, principals and school authorities), confidentiality, anonymity and the right to withdraw was seen to be of critical importance. While being informed by the literature (Alderson, 2004; Hill, 2005; Thomas & O’Kane, 1998) and the CCYP’s own policy in relation to ethical research with children (2009), we were particularly cognisant of the need to reflexively apply western ideas of ethical conduct within the specific Vietnamese cultural context. In particular, we were informed by the work on ethics conducted as part of the *Young Lives* project in developing countries, including Vietnam (Morrow, 2009). This work emphasises the importance of explaining that the research may not change things in the short term.

2.4.3 Interviewing children in research

A range of specific considerations were taken into account when interviewing children and young people, and the research took into account a range of advice presented in the literature related to interviews with children (Alderson, 2004; Bessell, 2009a; Cameron, 2005; Einarsdottir, 2007; Epstein, Stevens, McKeever, & Baruchel, 2006; Freeman & Mathison, 2009; Hennessy & Heary, 2005; Thomas & O’Kane, 1998; Veale, 2005; Westcott & Littleton, 2005). In particular, consideration was given to methodological matters such as:

- Preparatory processes, including plain language explanations about what the research is about and the importance of establishing a shared purpose;
- The interview setting, including the comfort and dynamic established by furniture and the space itself and the potential for children to have some say in this location;
- Child-friendly methods and techniques to build rapport and help children become comfortable and to minimise the power differential between participants and researchers, including provision of a range of creative stimulus such as textas, crayons, pencils, play dough etc;
- Establishment of ‘ground rules’, including guidance about the structures and processes of the interview (including that it is OK not to know what to answer, or to say if they don’t understand something); and
- The importance of a flexible interview structure more consistent with relationship and conversation than with question and answer interviewing, including developing rapport through simple and clear ‘age appropriate’ language, beginning slowly by

talking about things the child knows and sees as unthreatening, and encouraging the child's free narrative and reflection.

Beyond these recognised considerations, this research has a particular focus on learning about and documenting culturally-specific issues impacting on the interviewing of children in the Vietnamese context. Bessell (2009) highlights the importance, particularly in cross-cultural settings, of discussing and articulating methodological considerations such that the principles and theoretical perspectives that underpin the researchers' actions are explicit, and divergent perspectives are explored. Hence, ethical and methodological issues and techniques such as those above were a particular focus of the collaborative planning and research training in this project (see Section 6.3).

2.4.4 Photo and drawing elicitation interviewing

Photo elicitation interview methods (sometimes referred to as 'reflexive photography' or 'hermeneutic photography') have been employed in research across a range of disciplines, but most recently have been a popular technique in research with children (Dockett, 2009; Einarsdottir, 2007; Epstein, et al., 2006; Rasmussen, 2004; Veale, 2005). This method is seen by writers in the field as diminishing some of the limitations of traditional style interviews in that the approach does not rely as strongly on verbal linguistic communication skills of young children; it presents an alternative to the 'question-and-answer' formula which may not be natural to children; and it breaks down the adult authority implicit in traditional interview formats, helping to build positive relationships between adult interviewers and children (Epstein, et al., 2006). The approach also empowers children who have choice about what to photograph, and to capture what is important for them (Einarsdottir, 2007).

The use of photos as a stimulus for interviews also provides a concrete product and creates a 'show and tell' dynamic that can make interviews more fun and less like a test in school. While there are ethical issues to consider, particularly relating to children taking photos of others (adults or children) without their consent, there is considerable value in children taking photos themselves so that they represent what is important and meaningful to them, and in order to better promote their deep reflection (Epstein, et al., 2006). Similarly, children's drawings can also provide a means of non-verbal expression, and provide an advantage that most children are familiar with the activity of drawing, although it needs to be acknowledged that some children do not like to draw, and that such approaches can also be culturally less appropriate in some contexts (Bessell, 2009a).





ChildFund as Research Partner

In this section we introduce ChildFund Australia, partner with the Centre for Children and Young People in conducting the research. We firstly discuss the nature of their work, focusing particularly on their role in Vietnam, before specifically discussing their activities in the Bac Kan province, the focus of this pilot project.

3.1 ChildFund Australia and their commitment to children

ChildFund Australia is an independent and non-religious international development organisation that works to reduce or eliminate poverty for children in the developing world. It is a member of the ChildFund Alliance, a global network of 12 organisations working in over 50 countries (ChildFund Australia, 2008). Their mission is to work in partnership with children and their communities at the village level across the areas of income and food security, healthcare, water and sanitation, education and HIV/AIDS prevention.

The ChildFund Alliance has a focus on children's wellbeing and aim to place children and young people at the centre of its operations and provides for them to actively participate in decisions which affect the design, delivery and evaluation of programs. ChildFund seeks to better understand children's experiences so that its operations are respectful of children's lives. It aim to give children a voice on issues that affect them and their chances for a better future (ChildFund Australia, 2008).

Education is a major focus of ChildFund, which aims to support children to realise their basic right to education in a safe and stimulating environment through a three-pronged approach of building the capacity of teachers and education managers, providing school facilities and infrastructure, and raising awareness for parents on child care and development and education (ChildFund in Vietnam, 2008). Where formal school systems are inadequate ChildFund helps communities to organise non-formal education activities such as increasing youth leadership, engaging young people in youth groups and civic activities and developing the literacy and life skills that enable them to fill positive roles in their societies (Wessells, 2005).

Fundamentally, we want children to develop into adults who are able to express their thoughts and feelings, be creative in their approach to life, feel connected to the diversity of people around them, and have hope that through their own actions they can live a life that will make them happy. Key competencies include being able to think critically about what's happening around them and to work constructively with others to effect change. Thus, they need to be skilled in cooperation, collaboration, listening, and communicating their thoughts. Programs therefore need to be organized around principles that will engage young people, seek their thoughts and feelings, and enable them to effect the changes important to them (Schwartzman, 2005, p.14).

A major focus of ChildFund, then, is building the agency of children and young people through providing opportunities for young people to contribute in age appropriate ways and engaging children in activities that set high expectations of them, focusing on their strengths, fostering their resilience and preparing them for adulthood while retaining choice, challenge, fun and friendship (Schwartzman, 2005). 'Forms of assistance that focus on children's abilities and on their potential as change agents as opposed to their weaknesses are more likely to reinforce their capacity to protect themselves and to overcome adversity' (Feeny & Boyden, 2003b, p.13). The ChildFund Alliance thus aims to:

- ensure that children and youth are listened to, and have meaningful and regular opportunities to contribute, for example during focus groups, to plan processes or to provide feedback and evaluate programs;
- institutionalise the voice of young people through the formation of Child and Youth Associations, working with Parent Associations, but ensuring that child and youth representatives have equal status with adults;

- provide opportunities for children and youth to be directly responsible for the implementation of programs they care about; and
- organise child centred spaces, children's clubs and other types of like-minded programs where children can go on a regular and ongoing basis to build their capability to participate in, and contribute to, their community (Schwartzman, 2005).

ChildFund's approaches are thus: child-centred; participatory (consultative, inclusive); capacity building (empowerment); sustainable (aimed at long term change); partnership-oriented; and rights-based (affirming dignity, entitlement and justice). ChildFund integrates a children's rights approach into its work, while not remaining tied to a strict rights-based approach (Wessells, 2005).

ChildFund is acutely aware that although children's agency and leadership are becoming more visible in their work, there is considerable scope to develop this crucial areas of work further (Feeny & Boyden, 2003b, p.15). It also recognises that children's full participation requires distinctive methodologies, a devolution of power and the adoption of child participatory practices of assessment, planning, implementation and evaluation, requiring training and capacity building (Wessells, 2005):

...there is little point in sending children ill-prepared to deliberate in adult spaces, and that their preferred way of working is to support children and young people's own spaces, from which the young people can launch their campaigns to influence decisions in adult spaces, using both insider and outsider tactics, as and when they feel fully prepared (Shier, 2008).

ChildFund recognise that there are significant challenges in pursuing these approaches, including a recognition that many young people, even if they have the capability, need time and support to master what is expected in participatory approaches. It recognises that facilitators who work with children, young people and parents need to develop their capacity to work with children and young people in this way, including developing understanding of creative and child-friendly methods for engaging young people.

While advocating a child centred approach, ChildFund is aware that talking directly to children and young people about issues affecting them has not traditionally been common practice and that their voices are often overshadowed by those of parents and other adults (Schwartzman, 2005). It recognises a need to view young people not as beneficiaries of programs but as actors in their own development. ChildFund thus want to engage in more participatory child-focused methodologies and methods and to increase resilience in children by supporting their coping skills, building on their resourcefulness and competencies and enhancing the leading role of children, youth and parents in poor communities by ensuring that they are the primary protagonists in program implementation.

3.2 ChildFund Australia's research agenda and background to the project

A Research Agenda Discussion Paper, prepared by ChildFund Australia in 2008, identified as a strategic direction the partnering with a University to support their research priorities. Through this document ChildFund identified over-arching criteria for determining research priorities, including that such research should: increase knowledge of children's experience; contribute to improved aid effectiveness; build organisational expertise on a particular issue(s); help build stronger public support for development activity; increase ChildFund's profile and influence through informed engagement with various stakeholders; provide opportunity for children to participate meaningfully, give their own perspectives and suggest solutions based on their experiences; and inform program directions and planning.

In formulating their research agenda, ChildFund were acutely aware that although children's agency and leaderships were becoming more visible in their work, that these needed to be cultivated further. ChildFund Australia thus approached Southern Cross University's Centre for Children and Young People with a proposal to enter into a partnership to investigate ways of doing this most effectively.

Early discussions around the location of the proposed research led to a focus on Vietnam and in particular the province of Bac Kan, a district within which ChildFund had only begun working in 2008. In the following sections we provide background to ChildFund's work in Vietnam, and more specifically the Na Ri district in Bac Kan province.

3.3 ChildFund Australia's role in Vietnam

ChildFund has been **working in the poorest regions of Vietnam since 1996** and is continuing to increase the scale and scope of their operations (ChildFund in Vietnam, 2007, 2008). They aim to double in size (to work across 23 communities) while maintaining high quality, adopting new techniques, enhancing monitoring and evaluation systems and engaging in partner and staff development to position themselves as a leading child-centred organisation (ChildFund in Vietnam, 2007). ChildFund has constructed numerous schools and classrooms, but in many areas the infrastructure and facilities are still poor quality with insufficient classrooms, no learner-friendly resources and poor sanitation. 'Aside from recently installed systems, almost no preschools or primary schools have appropriate sanitation facilities' (ChildFund in Vietnam, 2007, p.10).

ChildFund in Vietnam directly contributes to the agreed Vietnam Development Goals (VDG), which themselves contribute to the Millennium Development Goals. **In relation to education**, VDG2 concerns the universalisation of education and improving education quality through: increasing net enrolment in schools; improving the quality of education and increasing full-day primary schooling; and eliminating illiteracy for women under 40.

ChildFund in Vietnam articulate, as a core organisational goal, for *children to realise their right to a quality basic education achieved in a safe and stimulating environment*. This goal is pursued by ChildFund in Vietnam through:

- extending the scope of their education programs;
- improving the capacity of teachers and education management skills of officials;
- improving teaching and learning conditions through upgrade of infrastructure;
- upgrading and constructing water supply and sanitation facilities in kindergartens and primary schools;
- improving communities' awareness of education;
- enhancing ownership of project partners and transparency of project implementation; and
- improving efficiency and quality of the education program to ensure its sustainability, in line with the DEV model.

(ChildFund Australia, 2008; ChildFund in Vietnam, 2007).

In line with recent changes to the curriculum in Vietnam (outlined earlier) ChildFund is providing **training to teachers** and officials in child-focused methodologies, and report subsequent improvements in teacher motivation and classroom skills (ChildFund in Vietnam, 2007). While training has been successful, it is not yet sustainable as the methodologies leave with the teachers (ChildFund in Vietnam, 2007, p.11). ChildFund is thus focusing on creating a core group of teachers and officials with the capacity to train others in the future.

ChildFund in Vietnam's fifth goal is to ensure that children and their communities can actively participate in decisions which affect the design, delivery and evaluation of ChildFund supported programs. Part of this goal is to strengthen participation of communities and children in their activities (ChildFund in Vietnam, 2007). To this end, ChildFund in Vietnam recently hosted two Children's Forums (in Bac Kan and Hoa Binh provinces) providing 100 children with the chance to express their ideas on issues relating to their lives and rights directly with local decision makers (ChildFund Australia, 2009). These Forums were part of the National Children's Forum (Ministry of Labor - Invalids and Social Affairs, 2010) which was discussed in Section 2.3.3.

3.4 Na Ri District, Bac Kan province

Bac Kan province is located approximately 170 kms (3-4 hours drive by car) north of Hanoi and is a mountainous province covering some 4,795,540 sq kms. It is home to approximately 291,700 residents (2003 figures) and has a diverse and complicated topography, with many rivers and springs. With abundant and diverse natural resources (including forestry and coal) the area is favourable to mining, processing and tourism. Ethnic groups in the area include Viet (Kinh), Tay, Nung, Dao, San Chay, and others like Hoe, Thai and Ngai. Bac Kan remains one

of Vietnam's poorest provinces with poor infrastructure, low income per capita, unsustainable economic achievements and limited access to markets and public services (ChildFund in Vietnam, 2009). Average annual household income in Bac Kan was estimated in 2009 to be 8,400,000 Vietnamese dong (approximately \$500 Australian dollars). Approximately 25% of households in the province are considered poor. ChildFund works in two districts in Bac Kan (Bach Thong and Na Ri), and supports 13 communes across these districts.

ChildFund began working in Na Ri (or Na Ry) district in 2008. Na Ri has a population of approximately 40,000 people, including 10,519 children aged 0-18 (District Education Department statistics). The Na Ri district covers an area of 864 square km and has a sizeable ethnic minority population of Tay (45.3%), Mông (1.7%), Dao (6.7%) and Nùng (30.7%) with 7.8% Kinh. The main product and source of income for the population is agriculture and the average annual income per capita (in 2008) was 3.4 million dong (about \$208 Australian). Around 45% of households in Na Ri are considered poor. The dominant agricultural profile for the district is rice and corn and animal husbandry is also practiced extensively, with buffalos, cows, pigs and chickens raised. Development challenges include poor transportation and road facilities, lack of irrigation, poorly built schools, lack of electricity and communication, unsafe water, lack of improved agricultural practices, poor accessibility to markets, poor health services and limited knowledge of people regarding health care. Overall the standard of living is low.

ChildFund work with seven of the poorest communes in Na Ri, these being Con Minh, Quang Phong, Don Xa, Xuan Duong, Duong Son, Huu Thuc and Cu Le. The number of children in these seven communes is 4579. These communities are the most isolated and difficult to reach, the farthest being 45 km from the district centre. Phase one projects have focused on livelihood, water and sanitation and education. Health and child protection programs will follow in coming years.

A major focus of ChildFund's work in this district is on enhancing the quality of teaching. In terms of its education program ChildFund is focused on two components: the teaching and learning environment; and capacity building. New classrooms are being built to replace thatched classrooms and work is being done to equip classrooms with basic resources and facilities to ensure a stimulating teaching and learning environment. The capacity building component focuses on teacher capacity in relation to child-centred methods and school leaders' skills in school management and planning. Data on education provision in the seven communes which are supported by ChildFund, are provided in Figure 1.

3.4.1 ChildFund's KAP survey of education provision in Na Ri District

A baseline KAP survey (knowledge – attitudes – practice) was conducted by ChildFund in 2008 to both recommend effective work methods and to provide baseline data upon which ChildFund in Vietnam could monitor progress and impact of their educational programs (ChildFund in Vietnam, 2008). This survey focused on the competency of school leaders and the professional knowledge and skills of teachers (including use of child-centred teaching methods). It also considered the knowledge, skills and attitudes of parents and the capacity of children.

Methodologically the **KAP survey** included a knowledge test for kindergarten teachers covering maths, Vietnamese, science, child nutrition, injury prevention and first aid and other teaching topics. Heads and deputy heads of primary schools and kindergartens also underwent a test focusing on management perspectives, knowledge and skills. Observations of 12 learning sessions were conducted during classroom visits, focused on procedures, teaching methods and skills as well as confidence of students. Group discussions occurred with school leaders, teachers, parents, students and commune leaders.

Results (ChildFund in Vietnam, 2008) indicate that **school leaders** lack breadth of management capacity, engaging mainly in organisational tasks but not effectively planning or monitoring teachers. School leaders acknowledged that they had not been strategic or proactive in pursuing opportunities and support (such as funding for infrastructure) from outside the school and were aware that their planning was very short term. They admitted having difficulty providing feedback to teachers due to their own poor knowledge and teaching skills, their minimal preparation for the transition from teacher to school administrator and the lack of documented guidelines and role models. Further, there are no job descriptions for school masters or deputy masters, performance management does not promote improvement in practice and there are no structures for evaluating performance.

Figure 1: Details regarding schools in the Na Ri district

Commune	Côn minh	Quan g Phon g	Đông xá	Cư lễ	Dươn g sơn	Hữu thác	Xuân Dươn g	Total
Total of Preschool teachers and school leaders	11	8	12	8	10	9	12	70
Total of Primary school teachers and school leaders	19	9	20	16	9	10	16	99
No of preschool teachers	9	6	9	6	8	7	10	55
No of teachers of five year old class	3	3	6	3	3	2	4	21
No of primary school teachers:	16	8	17	13	8	9	14	85
Grade 1	4	2	4	3	2	2	4	21
Grade 2	4	2	4	3	2	2	3	20
Grade 3	3	2	3	3	2	2	3	18
Grade 4	3	1	4	2	2	2	2	16
Grade 5	2	1	2	2	1	1	2	11
Total No of preschool pupils	123	69	116	67	96	84	127	682
Total no of primary school pupils	161	96	186	11	109	99	187	944
No of preschool classes	9	6	9	6	8	5	10	53
No of preschool concretized classes/total classes	0/9	9/6	0/9	0/6	0/8	0/5	0/10	09/53
No of primary school classes	13	7	16	10	8	7	11	72
No of preschool concretized classes/total classes	0/13	0/7	0/16	0/10	4/8	5/7	9/11	18/72
No. of pupils in biggest preschool class	26	18	19	15	16	22	24	
No. of pupils in smallest preschool class	14	8	6	10	14	11	9	
No. of pupils in biggest primary class	23	20	23	15	17	19	23	
No. of pupils in smallest primary class	4	2	2	5	12	7	5	
Qualification of pre school teachers: (VT=Vocational training)	VT	VT	VT	VT	VT	VT	VT	
Qualification of primary school teachers: (VTC=VT College)	VTC	VTC	VTC	VTC	VTC	VTC	VTC	
Population	2,477	1,554	2,568	2,023	1,654	1,455	2,230	13,961
No of male pupils from 5 to 18	358	207	342	223	221	163	310	1,824
No of female pupils from 5 to 18	312	179	318	233	203	172	285	1,702
No of boy from 0 to 5	119	54	103	66	72	69	93	576
No of girl from 0 to 5	102	71	98	55	38	59	97	520
Rate of male: female in general	53.5: 46.5	54.4: 45.6	49.3: 50.7	50.09: 49.91	54.9: 51.1	50.1: 49.9	51.3: 48.7	

In relation to **teachers**, the KAP survey (ChildFund in Vietnam, 2008) showed that teachers' knowledge of the curriculum was very limited, and is generally confined to knowledge of the curriculum of only the grade they are teaching. Teachers' personal abilities in maths, Vietnamese and science were inconsistent and in some cases quite low which, for example, was seen as contributing to their inability to explain procedures or assist students with incorrect answers. This meant that some teachers simply shouted at children that their answers were incorrect rather than assisting or re-explaining, thus making children embarrassed and confused. Teachers' reading comprehension, ability to structure answers in their own words and to structure a paragraph were particularly problematic. Knowledge of science was higher, with teachers able to remember knowledge (facts) but experiencing difficulty connecting knowledge and analytical skill. Only about 50-60% of primary teachers were committed to their jobs (ChildFund in Vietnam, 2008) and hence (the report claims), subsequently interested in improving the skills and outcomes (and enjoyment) of children (although these numbers are higher for kindergarten teachers). There were no systems in place to monitor and improve

teachers' performance and no incentive for teachers to learn, since all have life time security and get increments every three years, provided they are not subject to disciplinary action. Lack of training, frequent curriculum changes and lack of support from school management had created additional challenges.

Issues concerning **teaching skills** were also considered in the KAP survey (ChildFund in Vietnam, 2008). While session planning was practiced, little guidance has been given to teachers on how to do such planning beyond the need to keep records of no more than one side of an A4 sheet. Teachers were not confident defining learning objectives, simply taking these from the teachers' guidebook without adjusting them to the needs of their students. Details of activities or guidance for delivery such as prompt questions were not included in planning documents and, if included in delivery, may have little to do with the objectives. Due to the heavy reliance on children's text books, delivery of a session at times did not coincide with learning objectives. Teachers did not differentiate activities for students of differing abilities and activities were often not designed with the pupil's capacity in mind, hence strong pupils got bored and a significant group of weak students struggle. Similarly, teachers were not confident to vary content, examples or activities to make them more relevant to students' background and interests. Issues were highlighted in teachers' abilities to design age-relevant creative or engaging (child-focused) exercises or to use stimulus resources (such as pictures) to talk through issues (ChildFund in Vietnam, 2008). Questioning, class monitoring skills and the ability to provide constructive feedback to students were identified as problematic. Kindergarten teachers' knowledge of first aid was also concerning.

The concept of **child-centred teaching methods** had not (at the time of the KAP survey) been grasped by Bac Kan teachers. Notions of a good teacher were connected to level of qualification and knowledge of subject, not teaching methods. Concepts of a good primary teaching session were that the content of the text book is covered, pupils are silent and attentive to the teacher's lecturing, which was oft times done in a different (non-friendly) voice that distanced them from their students. The physical arrangement of classrooms places teachers at a higher level to students (based on the design of university lecture rooms) which adds physical and psychological distance between teachers and students and is unfriendly to children. While teachers did make some effort to organise small group work, give feedback, encourage pupils and to use questions to prompt children's participation, primary classrooms were very serious, boring, tense and lack spontaneity (ChildFund in Vietnam, 2008). Only a small number (estimated at 20%) of children were confident to communicate with teachers, and answer most of the questions. The class atmosphere in kindergartens is generally good and children are more confident, happy and participate enthusiastically, particularly where teachers were trained as early childhood educators, and there was less 'distance' between pupils and teachers as in primary classes.

Learning is passive across all subjects and children tend to learn to respond from rote rather than being able to answer questions or to produce sentences in their own words (although during focus groups they were capable of, and motivated to, speak in their own words about what they had learnt).

Focus groups with **parents** indicated that they wanted their children to do well at school so that they could pursue jobs other than farming. Many tried to provide assistance with homework but did not feel they had the knowledge or methods to assist them (as supported by Kim Cuc Nguyen & Fahey, 2001). Parents were not confident in communicating with teachers and schools, and did not feel they could provide feedback. Many parents reported that children were afraid of teachers because they shout.

Recommendations from the Bac Kan KAP survey (ChildFund in Vietnam, 2008) focus on the need for professional development for school managers, training in subject knowledge for teachers and the establishment of a core group of teachers at each school who are trained to oversee and facilitate planning and delivery of activities and who can coach/train other teachers. A teacher performance management system was also recommended.

While the Bac Kan KAP survey did mention interviews with students, the perspectives of children are not strongly evident in the report. Consistent with ChildFund's explicit goals of engaging in participatory child-focused methodologies, and of building children's agency, subsequent developments in service delivery stemming from the KAP survey need to be informed by further engagement with children themselves.

Conducting the Project



Bessell (2009a) emphasises the importance, particularly in cross-cultural settings, of discussing and articulating methodological considerations in order that the principles and perspectives that underpin researchers' actions are clear, and so that divergent perspectives can be explored.

In this section we describe the process of planning and conducting the research project, including aspects of research training and project preparation. Figure 2 below provides a brief overview and summary of research activities and then some of these key activities are elaborated on in subsequent sections.

Figure 2: Summary of key research activities and milestones.

23 rd April	- Initial telephone meeting involving Nigel Spence, Judy Cashmore, Martin Hayden, Anne Graham, Renata Phelps. Background to the two organisations was provided, and potential for collaboration was explored.
16 th June	- Telephone meeting involving Nigel Spence, Peter Walton, Ha Thi Tuyet Nhung, Judy Cashmore, Martin Hayden, Anne Graham, Renata Phelps. This meeting was pivotal in shaping the direction of the project.
14-17 th August	- Adjunct Professor Judy Cashmore and Dr Renata Phelps visit Vietnam, including trip to Bac Kan. Observations in classrooms and discussions with local schools and stakeholders
28 th -31 st October	- Ha Thi Tuyet Nhung and Ha Thi Quynh Anh visit Australia for collaborative planning and research training, including practise in research methods, preparation of interview questions, consent forms, project information etc. Trialling of research methods with a group of Australian children. Consultation with YPBV
29 th Oct 2009	- Ethics approval gained – Approval number ECN-09-136 - Letter of support from District Education Office is obtained [see Appendix 1]
November	- Training is replicated by Nhung and Quynh Anh, with two additional researchers - Recruitment of initial 20 children and permission gained from parents and schools - ChildFund Project Officer briefs children and teachers regarding first field trip
6-9 th December	- First Field Trip - Two focus groups held with 20 children. Interviews with 10 children ¹⁰
Mid-End Dec	- Transcription and translation of initial data
Jan 1 st -13 th	- Analysis of initial data by SCU researchers
15 th January	- ChildFund Project Officer briefs children and teachers regarding second field trip
16-18 Jan	- Renata Phelps travels to Hanoi to meet with research team. Feedback on initial data and modification of research methods/interview questions
24-27 th January	- Focus groups and interviews with remaining 40 children
February 2010	- Transcription and translation of data and return of data to SCU for analysis
March-April 2010	- Analysis of data by SCU researchers - Preparation of children's book - Draft report prepared
3 rd – 11 th May	- CCYP staff travel to Vietnam to discuss draft report with ChildFund staff and present initial findings to stakeholders, including children and teachers - Discussion and planning of potential follow-on study

¹⁰ Due to problems with the cameras utilised in the first field trip, the interviews with 10 of the children were postponed until the second field trip.

4.1 Early activities and planning decisions

In an early meeting between CCYP and ChildFund staff (16th June, 2009) the decision was made to focus the research, at least initially, on the Na Ri district in Bac Kan province since, as described in the Section 3.4, ChildFund had only recently begun working in this area and it was felt that a study here would thus have most potential to influence service provision. It was also decided that the pilot should focus on children of primary school age, since most agencies are foremost concerned to improve participation and quality in these compulsory education years and ChildFund's education programs prioritised this group.

Due to the linguistic, cultural and methodological complexities involved and the pilot nature of the project, it was felt to be best to start with a focus on older primary children (aged 8-10), providing an opportunity to collaborate with Vietnam-based staff in developing culturally appropriate, child-focused research methods with an older age group before attempting to work with younger children.

4.1.1 Initial visit of Australian researchers to Vietnam

On 14-17th August Adjunct Professor Judy Cashmore and Dr Renata Phelps visited the Bac Kan province in Vietnam, meeting with education officials, principals, teachers, parents and children. Through interpreters the proposed research was discussed with various stakeholders and their views sought as to the relevance and appropriateness of the project. The response was very positive with many stakeholders, particularly parents, expressing their desire to support activities which would improve schooling for their children.

This trip was also an opportunity to spend some time observing in schools and classrooms to better understand the cultural context and nature of the pedagogy in the Na Ri district. It was an opportunity to interact with the community more broadly to better understand the issues and cultural context that shape children's experience of learning and schooling.

4.1.2 Decisions regarding the Advisory Groups

Initially it had been intended that the project would establish two advisory reference groups, namely a) a Children's Advisory Reference Group, consisting of approx 10 children aged 8-18; and b) an Adult Advisory Reference Group, including stakeholders from community and educational bodies (such as MOET, school administrators/principals and/or someone from a University or teacher training institute and a language specialist). These two groups were intended to play a role in helping to shape the research and provide feedback and guidance at key points in the progress of the project.

It was initially envisaged that Judy and Renata could meet with these groups on their first visit to Vietnam. However, in early discussions between Renata and Nhung it became clear that the concept of an Advisory Group was not a commonly understood one in Vietnam and there were discrepancies in understandings between 'appointing' project staff and having others involved in more voluntary, advisory roles. It was decided that it would be better not to try and rush the establishment of the groups at that time, but rather to discuss these further during the visit and potentially establish such a group later in the project's process.

During the visit the notion of Advisory Groups, how they functioned, and the roles they performed were discussed in more detail. This, and Nhung's subsequent visit to Australia, where she met with the CCYP's *Young People Big Voice*, provided her with a clearer understanding of the functioning of such groups. However Judy and Renata's trip to the Province and Communes also provided them with a more realistic understanding of the pragmatic issues in establishing such groups given the distances between locations. It was recognised that this would inhibit the establishment of any group with representatives from Hanoi and the local areas. Even within the local areas, forming a group of young people from different communes would be extremely difficult given travel difficulties and issues in involving children of age 15-18 who are out of school as they are often busy with jobs.

While both the CCYP and ChildFund Australia remain very committed to the importance of such groups in any ongoing research, pragmatic issues such as how, where and when such a group or groups would function would need to be resolved.

4.1.3 Decisions regarding staffing

Ha Thi Tuyet Nhung from ChildFund Vietnam was appointed as Project Leader within Vietnam. Nhung is the Education Coordinator, responsible for leadership, management and supervision of all aspects of ChildFund's education projects. She has taught as a secondary school teacher and has a Bachelor degree in foreign languages including English and a Master in Educational Leadership and Management from Dalarna University, Sweden.

Appointments were also made of further research assistants and the following three additional staff were contracted:

- **Ha Thi Quynh Anh** was the Theme Coordinator in Women and Girl Rights with ActionAid Vietnam. She had a Master of Development Studies from Australia and a Certificate of Human Rights towards Gender Equity from Sweden;
- **Le Thi Dan Dung** was a researcher from the Institute of Human Studies, Vietnamese Academy of Social Sciences. She has a Master of Applied Anthropology from Australia and a Bachelor of Arts (Ethnography) and Bachelor in Foreign Language (French) from Vietnam; and
- **Ton Thi Tam** is a researcher from the Ethnic Minority Education Department, Ministry of Education and Training (MOET). Tam has a Master of Arts from Vietnam and had been a secondary teacher.

4.2 Collaborative planning and research training

Two of the Vietnamese researchers, Ha Thi Tuyet Nhung and Ha Thi Quynh Anh, visited Australia for five days in October 2009 to engage in collaborative planning and research training. Over the period of 5 days we talked extensively about cultural issues and refined the research process, including developing the interview schedule. The discussions also included extensive consideration of cultural issues related specifically to conducting research with children in the rural area of Vietnam.

4.2.1 Training in ethical and methodological aspects of research with children

Included across the five day visit was a range of discussions by way of training/preparing Nhung and Quynh Anh for involvement in the project, in particular conducting research with children and young people. These discussions served the function of orienting them regarding the philosophy of the CCYP. The discussions were also a means for the Australian researchers to learn more about children and childhood in Vietnam and to consider the influence of cultural considerations on the conduct of the research.

The discussions broadly considered:

- The ideals and philosophy of the CCYP, including: commitment to participation, protection, provision and emphasis on relationships and collaboration (with practitioners and policy makers and with children and young people themselves);
- Notions of researching *with* and *for* children and young people;
- Notions of 'children' and 'childhood' (as socially and culturally constructed);
- Cultural differences and distinctions and issues of approaching children and childhood in Vietnam;
- Acknowledging children's vulnerability but moving in a respectful way between vulnerability and agency;
- Deep ethics of working with children and young people and how this may apply in Vietnam. In particular we discussed children's voice, agency and competency and the belief that children have the capacity to articulate things that are important to their experiences. We also considered issues of power and authority, the challenge being how we build relationships so that we can scaffold children to have a positive experience and feel they have things to tell us as well as the need to put our own expectations to the side and let children tell their own story;

- Notions of confidentiality/anonymity/child protection and how this may apply in Vietnam;
- Ethical research requirements and the SCU Human Research Ethics Committee application process;
- The need to monitor community/stakeholder 'reactions' to the research and for the researchers to report any concerns (voiced or sensed) to the Australian researchers; and
- The need to keep asking: Does our research convey a fundamental concern and respect for children and where they are at a certain point of time... for their uniqueness of experience, for their agency, and vulnerability.

A copy of the CCYP's Working and Researching with Children and Young People: Code of Ethical Practice was also provided to the researchers.

While in Australia, Nhung and Quynh Anh were also able to attend a one day symposium at the University of Western Sydney called 'Children as experts in their own lives: Child inclusive research'. Nhung's attendance was funded by ChildFund Australia in addition to the project funds while Quynh Anh's attendance was funded by the project.

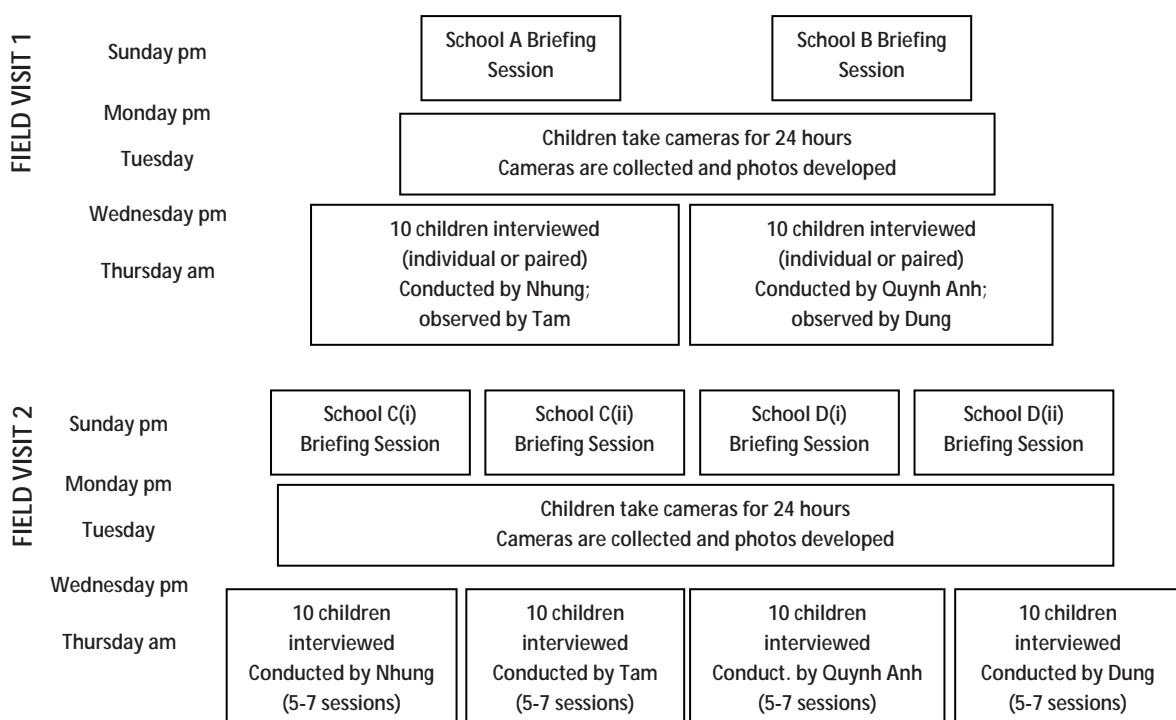
4.2.2 Research design and sampling decisions

While the decision to utilise in-depth interviews with children utilising photo-elicitation methods has already been explored in Section 2.4, it was also recognised that the research would require an initial Briefing Session with children in order to firstly, establish trust and rapport but also to explain the research, provide them with a camera and explain its collection prior to interviews.

Decisions regarding the research design, including how many students would be interviewed, and which schools they would be drawn from, were influenced by a balancing of pragmatic issues such as travelling times and length of time it was feasible for the researchers to spend in the field, with ideal research design. Our decision to allow children themselves to indicate whether they would like to be interviewed by themselves or in pairs (as part of the Briefing Sessions) also impacted on the research design.

After much discussion, the **intended design** for the interviews was thus construed as follows:

Figure 3: Initial research design



As outlined in Figure 1, the Na Ri district (incorporating 7 communes) includes a total of 944 students enrolled in primary school (statistics provided by ChildFund). It was not known specifically how many of these students were aged 8-10, but an approximate estimate placed this at 50% (i.e. 472) since this age group spans half of the compulsory primary school age group.

It was intended that the research would involve **50 students**, hence representing a sample of 10% of children in the target age group in Na Ri district. This number of research participants was considered appropriate for the pilot project, with the idea that the sample size may increase when other age groups or geographically-based students were recruited for the extended project. Sampling would aim to represent the diversity within the Na Ri district, including related to gender, ethnicity, socio-cultural, level of academic achievement, disability and those from diverse home backgrounds.

Following discussions it was decided that **school selection** would be made on the basis of pragmatic issues such as distance and ability to reach the location within the allocated field-trip timeframe, as well as having a supportive Head Teacher and enough children in the 8-10 age group to ensure efficiency in the use of researcher time.

It was also decided to involve the local ChildFund Project Officer (PO), given her ability to work more closely with the schools. Teachers were to provide the PO with a copy of their class lists. The lists were then divided into boys and girls and then every third or fourth student (depending on numbers in the class) was selected from each list. A contingency list of 2-3 children was also made in case parents or children themselves did not consent to participation.

4.2.3 Management of communications with schools and parents

The local PO was asked to be involved in initiating the local dialogue with Head teachers and classroom teachers and to have the initial conversation with the children about whether they would like to be involved. She also took carriage of providing the letters to parents for children to take home and negotiated the location and timing of the briefing sessions and interviews with schools and parents.

A briefing session was also held for the Head Teachers and classroom teachers from each selected school to explain the project and the roles they needed to play, namely:

- to assist by providing class lists;
- to remind children about involvement; and
- to serve as a contact if parents had any concern.

A written briefing sheet, prepared for the PO to explain these activities and the required timing of them, is included in *Appendix 2*. The letter provided via the PO to the parents (in English) is included in *Appendix 3*.

Note that signed consent was not requested of the parents since, after much discussion, it was ascertained that signing a document would be regarded suspiciously by parents. Rather it was felt that passive consent (i.e. asking the parents to notify the school if they *did not* want their child to participate) was more appropriate and this was approved by the SCU Human Research Ethics Committee.

4.2.4 Development and refinement of the briefing sessions and interview schedule

The development of the briefing session notes and the schedule of interview questions was a major focus of the planning sessions in Australia. Relevant documentation was prepared and translated into Vietnamese. English versions of the documents are included in Appendices as follows:

- A letter for parents regarding the research project [*see Appendix 4*];
- Detailed notes for conducting the briefing sessions [*see Appendix 5*];
- The individual interview questions [*see Appendix 6*]; and
- Reminder list for children about photos [*see Appendix 7*].

Other very specific issues which were considered in this planning phase related to:

- Time commitment from children;
- Literacy levels of parents, to read the consent letter;
- Data collection strategies – voice recorder, notes and allocating identifiers for students;
- Matters related to photo development – how many, what happens to each copy, labelling and identifying photos from comments made in the interviews;
- Interview strategies, including helping children to feel at ease and issues of ‘gifts’ and food; and
- The need to document what we learn about the methods right through the process.

Through our discussions at this time we came to recognise a particular issue around language and construction of ‘learning’ (see Section 7.2.1) and so we also realised that we needed to include a discussion in the Briefing Sessions with children about what ‘learning’ meant to them and how it was being defined in the research. It was decided that we would record this discussion and have it translated (see Sections 6.1.1 and 7.2.1).

4.2.5 Obtaining feedback from children and young people

An important priority in the planning of the research was to involve children themselves in shaping the research design. While the formation of a Project Youth Advisory Group wasn’t feasible within the constraints of this project (see Section 4.1.2) we were still keen to integrate as best we could children and young people’s involvement in the research design.

Five Australian students (children of staff) were brought into the Centre for an afternoon, providing the opportunity to trial the Briefing Session and interview questions with children in English. The Briefing Session was led by Renata Phelps while Nhung, Quynh Anh, Anne and Robyn observed and took notes. We then held two interview sessions, each with two of the children. One was conducted by Renata and the other by Robyn, with Nhung, Quynh Anh, Anne and one of the other children observing and offering feedback following the session.

Nhung and Quynh Anh also had the opportunity to meet with the CCYP’s youth consultative group, *Young People Big Voice* (YPBV). They shared some background about life for children in rural Vietnam and then YPBV members provided feedback on the project methodology and specifically the research questions.

A number of important refinements to the interview schedule were made on the basis of these interactions.

4.2.6 Training in Vietnam

On return of Nhung and Quynh Anh to Vietnam a further training day was held with Tam and Dung to ‘pass on’ information, skills, learning and process and procedures from the Australian training sessions. An information sheet upon which this session was based had been prepared with the CCYP researchers while in Australia, and is included as **Appendix 8**.

It was also recognised that there was a need to brief the translators and transcribers concerning important considerations regarding their role. Informed by Boyden et al. (2003)’s project, we were particularly conscious of the importance of emphasising the need to translate what children said literally, rather than provide their own interpretations. An information sheet for this purpose was prepared (see **Appendix 9**) and this was talked through with the researchers by Nhung.

4.2.7 Purchasing of equipment

Four digital voice recorders were purchased in Australia for the interviews and taken back to Vietnam by the visiting researchers. The decision was made, however, to purchase the cameras for children in Vietnam. Initially, disposable cameras were purchased, however fortunately before they were used in the field a major issue was discovered with their functionality, with many not being useable. It was impossible to tell which worked until photos were taken.

Hence, with only a matter of days before the first field trip was scheduled, it was decided to purchase alternative equipment. A range of factors, including price and availability, led to the purchase of non-disposable cameras.

Due to issues on the first field visit (see below), subsequent disposable cameras were purchased from Australia.

4.3 The first field visit

The first field visit to Na Ri occurred from 6th–9th December, 2009. Audio data was then transcribed and translated and forwarded to CCYP staff late in December and an initial analysis was conducted of this data before Renata's return trip to Hanoi to meet with staff on 16th January. This section summarises key points about the first field visit, mainly derived from the debriefing session.

4.3.1 Feedback on the first field visit

It was initially intended that the first field visit would incorporate interviews with 20 children from two different schools – School A and School B. Briefing sessions were held at both of the schools and children were provided with cameras. However, unfortunately none of the cameras used at School B worked, and so it was decided to postpone the individual interviews at that school and instead come back and work with these children on the second field trip (see Section 4.4 regarding resulting research design).

Feedback from various stakeholders was very positive. The process of involving the ChildFund Project Officer (from Bac Kan) and Head Teachers went well and teachers seemed to be very supportive of the research and were curious about the process¹¹.

All sampled children chose to participate and there was thus no need to fall back on any children from the contingency group list. **Children were enthusiastic** participating in the Briefing Sessions and seemed to enjoy these. The only issue was that two children arrived quite late and the group process was somewhat delayed¹². Drawing of families worked well as an icebreaker although it did take quite a lot of time¹³.

The major issue with the first field trip related to the **camera functionality and photo development issues**. Some cameras didn't have their film or batteries loaded properly; some didn't wind on or photographed over each other. To compound issues, some children took the film out and exposed it when trying to find out what was wrong with their cameras. The cameras also did not clearly show how many photographs the children had taken. Only a small number of children had seen or used a camera before¹⁴. Photo development in Na Ri also proved problematic¹⁵.

¹¹ The teachers at one school (with Quynh Anh and Dung) were hovering outside the windows during the briefing session, wanting to know what the children were doing. When the children were drawing their families the teachers came in and told the children how to draw their pictures better! Quynh Anh had communicated to the teachers that they weren't meant to come in, but Nhung thought that perhaps because Quynh Anh and Dung were not known to them they may not have taken as much notice of them. We talked about this at length and it wasn't seen as being concern or interference per se but rather about the teachers' curiosity. We also discussed that the teachers were very curious about the cameras and probably wanted to have a go at using them.

¹² One child said that their bicycle had broken and the other that their father had been asleep (or something along those lines). It was suggested that if this happened again, we should start the other children with the drawings.

¹³ The drawing process took 1 hour for Quynh Anh and Dung's group. Nhung gave them 30 minutes and kept giving them warnings i.e. 10 mins to go, 5 mins to go.

¹⁴ A very small number must have seen a digital camera previously, as they asked about whether these cameras had a focus feature and how you changed batteries.

¹⁵ The team had planned to get the photos developed in the Na Ri district and the shop told them they would have them by 4.00pm. They waited till 12.00am and they still hadn't come. The Na Ri shop had sent them to the Provincial Town for development and they weren't returned till the morning. It was decided to have development done directly in the Provincial Town next time.

Children were generally comfortable and confident during the interviews although **younger children tended to be quieter and boys tended to be more talkative**. Whether interviews were better with individuals or pairs was seen to be very much dependent on children themselves. We decided to keep asking the children which they preferred.

The time taken to conduct the interviews was viewed as quite reasonable and appropriate, although dependent on how talkative the children were, however it was felt that there was scope to add questions to the schedule (see below).

4.3.2 Refining the research process

While meeting in Vietnam we talked at length about ways of refining and improving the briefing sessions and interviews with children. As part of this we read through sections of transcripts which had been annotated as part of the analysis process and identified strengths and weaknesses and area for improvement. As a result, a number of changes and refinements were made to the briefing and interview schedule and some areas were identified where interviewers needed to take care. In summary, these were as follows:

- Additional discussion in the Briefing Session about using the cameras, including the need to use the flash for all inside or darker shots and the need to turn the flash off afterwards (the red light tells them it is on);
- Adding a question about text books (length, difficulty, layout, how authentic);
- Adding a question about encouragement/praise – what type of encouragement helps them to do well in school;
- Adding a question about play – what games they play and what things they learn through play;
- Moving the location/order of the question about what they'd like to do when they grow up to ensure that the question about whether they think it is good to be a teacher followed on from that;
- Refining the initial discussion of the photos to encourage more informal interaction between the children (i.e. not necessarily looking at all of one child's photos before the other child's photos) and ensuring this process is relaxing but time efficient;
- Refining ways of asking children *how* they learn, for example: 'There are lots of ways that we learn things. Sometimes we read it, sometimes we listen to someone tell us how to do it, sometimes we watch someone doing it themselves, and sometimes they specifically show us how to do it';
- The need for care in asking open versus closed questions and ways of prompting for further information¹⁶ (see Section 6.3.3.);
- The need to providing a balance of dialogue time with each child and not leave it too long until questions were directed at the other of the pair;
- Not focusing on the most interesting or beautiful photo but one which provides stimulus for discussion of learning approaches (see Section 6.3.1);
- The need to encourage children to consider a range of learning activities at home, not just those mentioned in the Briefing Session; and
- Making sure at the end not to imply that we would be telling *their* parents what they have told us. Rather we, need to ask 'are there things that you don't want us to tell *anyone*' or 'are there photos you don't want us to show *anyone*'.

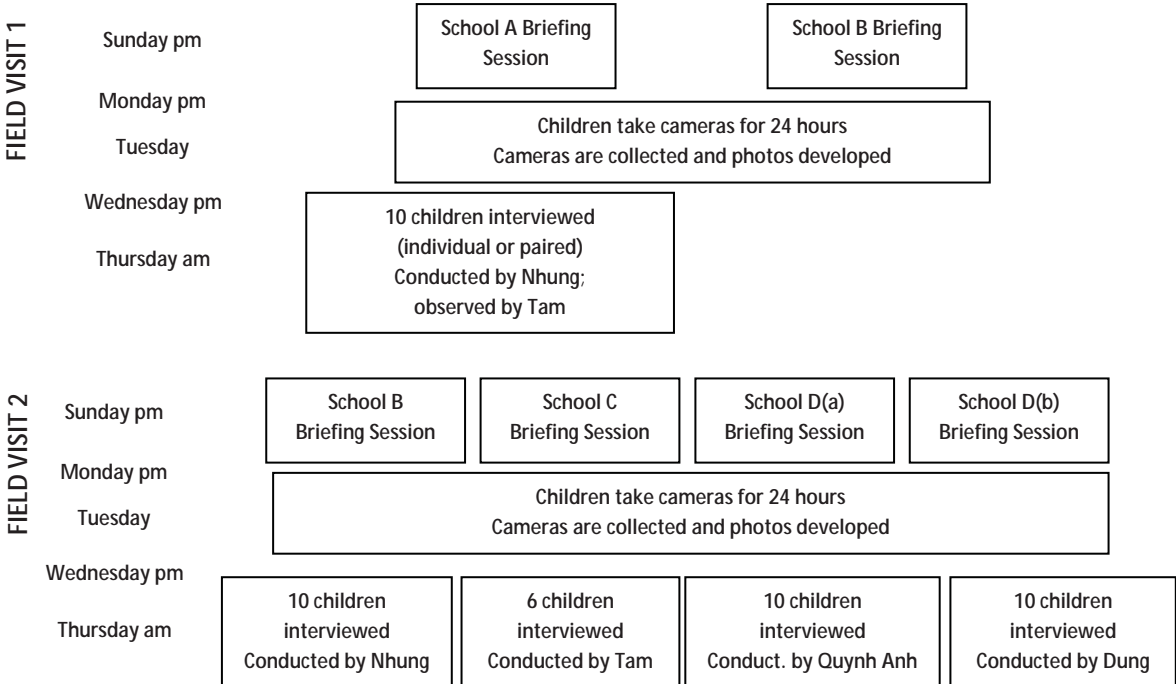
¹⁶ A list of phrases which may be beneficial to use was compiled, including: Can you give me an example of that... Tell me more about... How do you feel when... What do you mean when you say... Can you remember the last time xxx happened? Tell me about this.... Tell me more about what you are doing in this photo... When you say what do you mean... give me an example.

4.4 The second field visit

The second field visit to Na Ri occurred from 24th – 28th January, 2010. Much more success was experienced with the cameras, with most children having a large number of photos successfully developed.

All went to plan with the interviews except that four children who had participated in the Briefing Session at School C had to attend a sport competition at district level, and were thus not available for interviews. For this reason, the total number of children interviewed was 46, as indicated in the following revised research design.

Figure 4: Final research design



Findings from the first and second field trip are documented throughout the following section, with an overall discussion provided in Section 6.





Findings

This section of the report presents the findings from the interviews with children, beginning with a brief overview of the Briefing Sessions and the introductions to the interviews. The findings are structured in relation to the key questions guiding each interview and hence report the children's views in relation to:

- Learning out of school;
- Learning at school;
- Social, emotional and physical wellbeing issues;
- Relationships and learning;
- Thinking about their futures; and
- Children's feedback on involvement in the project.

In presenting the findings we have chosen to privilege the children's voices over our own (as researchers) since the intent of this project was to capture and report as fully as possible their views and perspectives on learning and schooling. This has necessitated the inclusion of extensive interview text, including both brief comments from the children, as well as longer narrative dialogue with the interviewers and/or their research partners. We refer to the latter as **Interview Excerpts** and have numbered these sequentially as they are used to illustrate issues relevant across multiple themes.

5.1 Setting the scene

5.1.1 Briefing sessions

The role and importance of the Briefing Sessions has been previously explained. The Briefing Sessions began with the interviewers introducing themselves and then inviting children to draw pictures of their families, an activity the children seemed to enjoy. The purpose of the project was explained to children, including notions of confidentiality and anonymity, and that participation was voluntary (see Appendix 5). The children appeared to understand these concepts. The use of the tape recorder was explained, including that they could request it be turned off. All children seemed happy for the tape recorder to be used¹⁷. In some briefing sessions the interviewer asked children what they had been told about the project, and hence what they expected:

I was informed to come here today to get a photo camera, to be instructed how to take a photo and after that I can take some photos of my village (Think).

Today, both of you come here to do the project of ChildFund (Ti).

To know more about our learning in school and at home. [Who told you that?] My teacher (Thuy).

A conversation was then held with children about what 'learning' meant to them. Children's responses to this question are discussed in Section 6.2.

The children were then shown how to use the cameras and every child had a chance to practice taking a photograph. The purpose of the photos, and what children were required to photograph, was emphasised (i.e. objects or activities related to their 'learning', as identified in the above conversation). The children were provided with a sheet to remind them (Appendix 6).

Children were asked whether they wished to be interviewed by themselves or in a pair (that is, with an 'interview partner'). All indicated that they preferred a partner. On this basis, interview times were scheduled for each pair of children.

¹⁷ Children were reminded of the purpose of the tape recorder at the beginning of the interviews as well, and most seemed to remember its use from the Briefing Sessions and were again comfortable with its use.

Notions of anonymity and confidentiality were re-emphasised and children were asked to choose a pseudonym for themselves¹⁸. Most chose a 'standard' Vietnamese name, however two children chose 'Mickey' and 'Donald' and in one group the children chose names meaning butterfly (Buom), turtle (Rua), mountain (Nui), fish (Ca), stream (Tep), and starfruit (Khe).

Finally, children were reminded about the purpose of the project, what they needed to photograph, when the cameras would be collected and the date and time the interview was to occur.

5.1.2 Introduction to the interviews: Discussing the photographs

The interviews began by providing the children with copies of their photographs and encouraging them to talk about the images they captured. This conversation served the purpose of helping the children feel comfortable and willing to talk, however it also yielded information about the children's lives at home and school. Photos were clustered around three key themes:

- **Home:** These included photographs of themselves and their family; friends; housework (such as cooking rice, sweeping the floor, cooking meals, frying vegetables, making a fire, washing dishes); farm work (such as tending chickens, taking straw from paddock, pulling the weeds for paddy fields, transplanting rice seedlings, looking after chickens, horses and squirrels, ploughing the field, grazing buffalo, digging up peanuts, sowing corn and watering vegetables); as well as doing homework.
- **School:** These included photographs of their class and peers; their schoolyard; their teacher, furniture in the classroom; textbooks and samples of their writing; wall charts and photographs signifying processes of learning.
- **Environment/community:** While fewer in number, some photographs were of aspects of the natural or built environment, including scenery of farming fields, buildings, shops, flowers and the like.

Unfortunately, difficulties with the cameras (described in the previous chapter) meant that some children's photographs were blurred or miscoloured and five children had no photographs. In these cases the interviewer asked the children to describe what they had intended to photograph or encouraged them to contribute to the discussion of their interview partner's photographs.

5.2 Focus on learning out of school

After talking generally about their photos, children were asked to choose one or two which showed something they were proud of learning to do at home. Each of these photos was then intended to form the basis of a dialogue around how children learn, with interviewers prompting conversation through such questions as: When was this? Where was this? Why did you learn this? How did you learn this? Who helped you? How did they help you? How did you feel when you learnt to do this?

The purpose of this activity was to:

- assist understanding of 'learning' beyond school;
- help children to identify the range of activities that they have learnt to do at home; and
- contrast the ways children learn at home with how they learn at school.

The flow of this discussion varied considerably between interviews and children did not always choose photos that provided a rich stimulus for discussion of learning (see Section 6.3.1). In presenting data in this section, we have not distinguished between children's comments in response to the photos and those emerging from broader discussion¹⁹.

¹⁸ Unfortunately the names chosen by children in School A were misplaced and so alternate names were allocated for these children.

¹⁹ Note that homework (i.e. school work done at home) was discussed with out-of-school learning. However we have chosen to present this data in Section 6.3.6, since it is more directly related to school.

5.2.1 Tasks children perform at home

Children described a range of tasks they had learnt to do at home. Figure 5 summarises these, providing an indication of whether children identified these tasks as easy or hard. Although not a question specifically asked, some children also mentioned tasks they *would like* to learn to do and these are also included.

A number of additional and interesting activities were mentioned by children in the Briefing Sessions but were not raised again in interviews. These included knowing how to fix a motorbike and bicycle (Xanh), clean bicycles (Thom), fry eggs (Sang), learning to speak (Nhem) and making cars and swords (children at School C). The relative homogeneity of activities children *did* discuss in interviews is discussed in Section 6.3.3.

SUMMARY: Children were capable of performing a wide range of domestic and agricultural tasks from an early age, many of which involved risk, were frightening or physically demanding.

Figure 5: Tasks children perform, or would like to perform, at home

Tasks which children perceived to be easy * = also identified by some children as hard	Tasks which children perceived to be hard * = also identified by some children as easy
Sweeping the floor * Looking after chickens and ducks ²⁰ Cooking rice Frying vegetables Washing dishes Washing vegetables Taking care of younger sibling Watering the vegetables	Cooking rice* Washing dishes* Tending animals Ploughing Frying vegetable* Grazing buffalo Carrying water Collecting and carrying wood Washing clothes Holding my younger sibling.
Tasks not identified as either easy or hard	Tasks children would like to be able to do
Cultivating fields Digging up peanuts Sowing corn Feeding fish Taking straw from paddock Cooking Pho	Transplanting rice seedlings Catch fish with a net Drive the plough-tractor Farm the fields Building a house

Notably, some of the 'hard' tasks listed above may have been identified as such because they had been difficult for children to learn at the time, as opposed to them being difficult to do now²¹, as was highlighted in Huệ's response as to whether she found cooking rice easy or difficult:

When I don't know how to do it, I find it difficult, but when I can do it, I find it easy (Huệ).

Children described washing dishes as difficult because 'the teacups are fragile when we carry them' (Sang); 'because dishes are dirty, and washing is difficult' (Hải) and because 'if I don't hold dishes tight, they will fall down and break' (Hương). Frying vegetables was difficult because 'we have to wash the vegetable then pour the spice. If we add too much spice, it will become salty' (Lac & Thom). Washing clothes was difficult because 'if I don't wash carefully, the clothes are still dirty' (Khế).

Other tasks were difficult because they **involved risk, were frightening or physically demanding:**

The pigs make noise all the time [Do they make you scared?] Yes, they make very loud noise... they jump and make noise. [Did they ever bite you?] Yes (Canh).

I need to cut banana tree to make food for pigs. [So, you use a knife to cut the banana tree?] Yes. [Why is it difficult?] Because of the big and long knife. [Have you ever bled?] Yes (Trang).

²⁰ This included feeding them with bran, mash or rice, changing their water, grazing and picking straw for their nests.

²¹ In some cases the phrasing of the question may have created ambiguity.

I feed [the squirrels] with corn. I was bitten by the squirrels once when I fed them with a guava... I still feed them but I need to pour the food from top to bottom. They will bite me if I feed them by inserting food directly (Ti).

If buffaloes run into the forest, I feel so scared... If I can't find the lost buffaloes, I must go home and ask my parents to find them (Len).

Buffaloes like running... if I have to graze one of them, he will run following the others, and I can't catch him and make him come home (Donald).

Taking water is very hard. I take water from a pond. I take a big branch of a tree to go down to the pond and take water (Mickey).

They are very heavy. [If I] take a little water it is fine (Cá).

Take the water and climb the ladder are so difficult that I ask my grandmother to help... Because when going up the ladder I'm afraid of losing my footing and falling (Thúy).

Because going uphill to collect wood makes me exhausted (Minh).

Many children, when asked what house chores they found difficult, responded that they **didn't find anything difficult to do** (for example, Canh; Hue; Huệ; Tép; Rùa; Tổ; Huy).

Children were evidently **very capable of taking on roles and responsibilities from an early age**. Some described what age they remembered first learning to do tasks, examples of which follow²²:

- Em had been tending chickens since grade 1 and cooking rice since grade 3;
- Bubi had been washing dishes since grade 2 and sweeping floors since grade 1;
- Sang had been weeding the rice since grade 4 and cooking meals since grade 2; and
- Cá had been helping water vegetable plants since grade 2.

Children were also **enthusiastic to learn new and more challenging tasks**, as illustrated in the following quotes:

I like watching the plough- tractor... I'd love to drive the plough-tractor (Rùa).

I want to learn how to work in the fields to help my parents... to cut the wild-grass in the fields. I [also] want to help my parents sow the corn seeds (Lac).

Interview Excerpt 1: Nga describes cutting bamboo

- Nga: I learn to take wood... I take bamboo...In the forest.
Q: Ah, for what do you take bamboos in the forest?
Nga: To make floor.
Q: When you go to take trees, you have to cut them?
Nga: Yes.
Q: And then you have to carry them to home?
Nga: Yes
Q: How do you know to cut tree? Who teach you?
Nga: My mother
Q: Ah, how does your mother teach you to cut tree?
Nga: Use the knife to split the tree-trunk.
Q: Ah, splitting the tree-trunk. How does your mother teach you to split tree-trunk in order not to cut your finger?
Nga: Holding the hilt of knife.
Q: Ah, holding the hilt of knife. How do you carry such a long bamboo to home? You drag it?
Nga: This bamboo is light. Hi, hi...
Q: Ah, this bamboo is light. But does your mother teach you the way to carry it on your shoulder to keep it balanced?
Nga: Yes, right in the middle of the bamboo.
Q: At first do you have any difficulties?
Nga: Yes. There are many slopes... Many slopes and slippery walking.

²² A reminder that children were currently of age 8-10 and were in Grade 4 or 5.

Interview Excerpt 2: Donald describes how he learnt to graze buffalo

- Donald: I graze the buffaloes, cook rice, clean the floor, feeding chickens.
Q: How did you learn to do these tasks?
Donald: I learnt to do these tasks due to help from my parents.
Q: Ah... how did they do? For example, what did they instruct you to graze the buffaloes?
Donald: Uhm...we take buffaloes to the place with grass... and do not let them move to people's tomb.
Q: How do you know where grass is?
Donald: Ah...the buffaloes will find these places by themselves.
Q: They find themselves and you follow them?
Donald: Yes... Sometimes I know where grass is. I take them to come.
Q: Ah who show you these places where grass is?
Donald: I...walk around and I see.
Q: Ah I see. And how did you learn to cook rice?
Donald: First and foremost, my mother showed me. She said that I have to wash the pot and put rice into it then wash rice carefully. After that I pour water out then put water in the pot again. Uhm...and then put on the cooker.
Q: How many times did your mother instruct you before you can do well?
Donald: About...twice.
Q: How fast you are! Can you cook rice by yourself now or do you need your mother's instruction?
Donald: I can do it by myself.
Q: Ah can you. Do you have to do this work every day?
Donald: Yes, I do...Not every day. Some days my mother does, some days my father.

Interview Excerpt 3: Vu describes boiling water on the fire

- Q: Vu, besides tending the chickens, what else do you do at home?
Vu: Boil the water.
Q: Boil the water? How do you know to do it?
Vu: Pour the water into the pot then boil it.
Q: So what cooker do you use to boil the water?
Vu: A wood stove.
Q: A wood stove? Do you know to fire logs?
Vu: Yes.
Q: So how to fire logs?
Vu: It means arranging logs and putting the fire into a stove.
Q: Ok. Who taught you at the first time?
Vu: I saw through my eyes.
Q: Through your eyes? Do you know it by seeing?
Vu: Yes, I do.
Q: I find it difficult to fire logs. If the fire is off, how can you do?
Vu: I don't make the fire off.
Q: Really?
Vu: Need to concentrate.
Q: Concentrate? How do you concentrate? Concentrate on what?
Vu: Concentrate when the fire is off, I have to fire it again.

5.2.2 People who help children learn at home

Children were asked to talk about *who* they had learnt these tasks from. Predominantly mentioned were **parents**, but also commonly mentioned were **siblings, grandparents** and, less often, **aunts and uncles**.

I learnt to do it by watching my sisters or brothers. They used to do it when I was young. I used to follow them when they did it (Huy).

I came to my aunt's house. I saw my aunt setting the table and imitated (Thúy).

No patterns or gender stereotypes were revealed in the data relating to either parent playing a more central role in teaching children to do domestic or farm tasks. For example Nga's *mother* had taught her to cut bamboo in the forest (see *Interview Excerpt 1*) and Tiên's father had taught her 'how to hold and dry bowls instead of breaking them'.

Surprisingly, a small number of children responded that their **teacher** had taught them domestic tasks. This was understandable in relation to tasks such as sweeping, since children did this at school, however the following quote from Cá reveals a different perspective on children's interpretation of their teachers' role²³.

- Q: How about sweeping the floor, putting the rice pot in the right place? Who taught you to do these tasks?
Cá: Uhm...My teacher.
Q: Your teacher? How did she teach you?
Cá: She said that we shouldn't be lazy working. We must learn to do some work. And she said that we should know how to sweep the floor, wash the dishes, cook... and put the rice pot in the right place.

A number of children responded quite adamantly that they **had learnt to do these tasks by themselves**, as in the following extract:

- Q: How did you learn frying the vegetable?
Tố: I do it myself.
Q: How can you learn yourself? Tell me about it, please?
Tố: First, I wash the vegetable and then fry it.
Q: Who taught you to do that?
Tố: Myself.
Q: Do you do it by yourself or see others do it and imitate her? Or do you think it yourself?
Tố: By myself.

That said, some children may have misunderstood the question. For example, in the following exchange, Bili may have interpreted the question as meaning whether she now could do these tasks by herself or only with assistance:

- Bili: ...graze buffalo, take care of my younger sister, sweep house, wash dishes, and cook rice.
Q: Well, you can do a lot of things. Do you learn to do this work by yourself or someone helps you?
Bili: I learn it by myself.

SUMMARY: Children predominantly learn domestic tasks from parents, but also siblings, grandparents and, less often, aunts and uncles. No gender stereotypes were revealed relating to either parent playing a more central role or teaching particular types of tasks. Children also recognised that they were able to teach themselves domestic tasks.

²³ If teachers did, in fact, provide this form of 'encouragement' this might explain why children might be performing these home duties, or speaking readily about how often they do such tasks.

5.2.3 How children learn home tasks

When asked *how* they learnt these home tasks many children had difficulty responding, or responded in ways that didn't answer the question as anticipated by us as researchers. Typically, children's response about *how* they learnt involved a **description of what they had learnt, or a step-by-step description of how they performed the task**. These issues are illustrated in both *Interview Excerpts 1 and 2*. However in other interviews, children reflected more on **the processes of teaching and learning**, as in *Interview Excerpt 3*.

Once children did talk about learning process a number of themes emerged.

Observation followed by imitation was a commonly cited approach to learning domestic tasks. Sometimes the translated word 'aped', 'mimicked' or 'followed' was used²⁴. For example, when asked how he had learnt to look after the family chickens, Sang responded that he imitated his mother. Xanh spoke of learning to ride a bicycle: 'I observed the other then practiced by myself' and Duc stated that 'I look at my mother doing those things, then I imitate her' (Duc). Some children were quite adamant that it was **only through observation** that they had learnt particular tasks. This is illustrated in *Interview Excerpt 6* with Canh and Duc. Other children who talked about learning through observation elaborated that their parents had also **explained verbally**.

Demonstrations were thus also a means by which parents taught children to perform domestic tasks. Children spoke of being 'shown' by their parents how to complete a task. For example, Long spoke of her mother showing him how to wash rice and his grandmother showing him what level of water to use. Interesting language was used by Vu in describing his parent's approach:

- Q: What method do your parents use to help you learn to do them faster?
Vu: Beside me and teach me.
Q: You mean they are beside you and show you how.
Vu: Yes.
Q: Hold your hands and show you how?
Vu: Yes.

In later interviews, some researchers explicitly asked children **how many times** they needed to watch someone perform the task before they were able to do it themselves. Tuyét, for example said 2-3 times for easy things and 6-7 times for harder tasks. Thúy also responded that:

When I learnt to cook rice I saw not clearly enough to imitate...so I had to see them doing twice or three times (Thúy).

Children also mentioned their parents providing them with **tips or advice**. For example, in describing how his parents taught him to graze buffalo, Rùa indicated that they 'said I must be careful'. Similarly, Long said his parents taught him to do tasks by 'reminding' him:

They remind me that I should do it more carefully (Long).

Practice was also mentioned by children as a key to the way they learnt, as illustrated in the following quotes and *Interview Excerpt 7*:

Holding their younger sibling was difficult because I found it difficult to hold him, but after some practice, I got accustomed to doing it (Tiên).

When we don't know the way to ride bicycle, we learn to do that, the first time we grip the bicycle, we also can't ride. We should practice more time. If not when we ride, we will be afraid of falling (Thin).

SUMMARY: Children's response about how they learnt frequently involved a description of what they had learnt, or a step-by-step description of how they performed the task, rather than a focus on the processes of teaching and learning. When prompted they would speak of learning through observation and imitation, observation only, through demonstration and verbal explanation. Some children also mentioned receiving tips and advice, practicing and learning through mistakes and help seeking.

²⁴ Issues of language representing children's are addressed in Section 6.3.4.

Children also talked about **learning by making mistakes**. Quite a number, for example, spoke of breaking crockery as they learnt to wash dishes (for example Ti, Lan; Sang) or initially burning the rice when they cooked it (Thom; Hương; Em; Tuyết).

At first, my mother taught me to wash the teacups. Then I tried to learn though I broke some and gradually, I know how to do it (Ti).

Help seeking was also an important theme in children's responses about how they learn at home. Children generally seemed to be very confident to ask their parents for help or guidance. Thom, however, indicated that she preferred to ask her brother or sister:

Because they learn that for a longer time than my parents do. They learn better than my parents do (Thom).

It was also interesting to analyse **what children *didn't* say about how they learnt**. For example, when Tiên talked about learning to hold her brother she said that her parents had 'told' her to 'hold him tight'. Only after prompting from the researcher about whether her parents did it 'as an example for you' did Tiên responded 'yes'.

Matters related to teaching and learning are the particular focus of Section 6.2.

Interview Excerpt 4: Donald describes initial involvement in making sedge mats

- Q: I see that you have one photo of your parents making sedge mats at home. Right? Do you know how to do like them?
- Donald: I only know how to put this sedge...stick to others.
- Q: Ah do you? Who taught you to do?
- Donald: My mother.
- Q: Did she? So when your mother makes sedge mat, do you have to put this sedge stick to others for helping her?
- Donald: Ah...uhm...my aunt will help.
- Q: Ah your aunt will help. Have you ever helped your mother?
- Donald: Yes.
- Q: How many times?
- Donald: About...
- Q: Do you do many times?
- Donald: 15 times.

Interview Excerpt 5: Em describes how she learnt to cook rice

- Q: So who instructed you to cook rice?
- Em: My mom did.
- Q: So how did you learn to cook rice?
- Em: I ... by taking a ladle ...
- Q: You learnt it by seeing your mother then you repeated her action? or she instructed you to do each thing? or you learnt by yourself? How did you learn?
- Em: I learnt by seeing my mother then I copied.
- Q: Your mother did first and then you copied. Right?
- Em: Yes.
- Q: In the first time you copied her action, did you do it successfully?
- Em: No, I didn't.
- Q: Well, so what did you do next to get it?
- Em: It took me some days to practice.
- Q: You had to spend some days practising? So till now do you cook well?
- Em: Yes.

Interview Excerpt 6: Duc and Canh discuss learning through observation

- Duc: I cook the meals, wash dishes and stir-fry vegetable, and tend pigs.
Q: Who teaches you to do those things?
Duc: I look at my mother doing those things, then I imitate her.
Q: Did you need your mother to show you to do things step by step?
Duc: No
Q: No? Really? So you did by yourself. You observed yourself.
Duc: Yes A LITTLE LATER...
Q: What ways do you think helps you to learn something at home the best? Your parents make a sample for you or you observe yourself and you do a trial then.
Canh: I observe
Q: How about you, Duc?
Duc: Yes, I have the same idea.
Q: Do your parents guide you to do new things?
Duc: No
Q: Really? When you first irrigated vegetable, did your parents tell you how to do or did they just say “do it”?
Duc: No, they didn’t tell me how to do.
Q: So, how about feeding pigs? Did they just say “Feed the pigs”?
Canh: Yes

Interview Excerpt 7: Chuyên describes learning to dress her little sister

- Chuyên: I took a photo of my younger sister, she was sitting... because she is very pretty when she wears a dress, especially when she sits.
Q: Who dressed her?
Chuyên: My mother.
Q: ah, your mother. Can you dress her?
Chuyên: Yes, I can but she always cries when I do that... Because I usually forget to open the zipper. My younger sister is still small so if I don’t open it, she will feel uncomfortable.
Q: Ah, so does anyone instruct you to dress her?
Chuyên: Yes...when I was in third class. My parents and my older sister... They told me that when I dress her, I must open the button so that I can dress her easily.
Q: Do you like doing that?
Chuyên: Yes, I do... because her skin is very soft so I like touching it.
Q: After they instructed you, what did you do?
Chuyên: I practiced.
Q: Did you have to practice many times?
Chuyên: Yes, I did. One time, after my parent had bathed her, I told them to let me practice dressing her so that when they go out, I could dress her.

5.2.4 Out-of-school activities

Children were asked whether there were any out of school groups or activities that they were involved in that helped them to learn. This was an opportunity for children to discuss community/hamlet activities, youth groups, summer activities and (if they were involved in them) ‘extra lessons’ (see Section 2.2.3).

Most children at School A were involved in **singing and dancing activities** in summer, as were some children from other schools (for example, Duc & Canh; Linh & Phuong; Len; Tuyết; Chuyên; Tiên). These groups performed on special occasions such as National Unity Day, New Year Festival, International Women’s Day and Vietnamese Teachers’ Day. When asked who organised the groups, Ti and Sang indicated ‘some teachers and the teacher in charge of Union activities’ and Hue & Tu indicated the ‘Hamlet leader’. Children seemed to like these groups:

SUMMARY: There seemed to be many community-based activities which the majority of children participated in. Many of these activities were organised by teachers and children enjoyed participating in these and learnt a range of skills, particularly in performance. Some evidence of ‘extra classes’ was provided, but children were unclear in describing the function of these groups.

I learn a lot of wonderful songs (Tuyết).

I usually sing a song about Uncle Ho... I can learn that we must try our best to learn, even when we are gifted in one subject, we still should learn this subject (Chuyên).

There are many people. Some are the same as my age, some are older. [What do you learn from the group?] The way to be self-confident to perform on stage (Tiên).

A number of children also described being involved in community activities concerned with **improving the environment of their hamlet**.

We also have a group to do the clean-up at the monument... We do the clean-up there once a year. Mrs X and some people live there. They sometimes sweep the leaves and children in the summer activities come there to do the clean-up once a year. [Do you like it?] Yes, because we do the clean-up and the environment gets better and greener... and by doing this we show the gratitude to revolutionary martyrs (Sang & Ti).

At my hamlet, I take part in the activity of digging the ditches or clearing sewage... So that the water will flow into the paddy-fields... I did that work with some people in my hamlet... I learn that by digging and clearing the drainage system or ditches, the water flows into the paddy fields where other farm products are planted and it helps them grow better and we will have bumper crops (Huy).

I joined the activity of sweeping the village lane... From that activity, I learn that everyone in my hamlet knows how to protect the environment (Lan).

Only a small number of children indicated that they were members of **Young Pioneers**²⁵ (Sang; Ti). It was interesting, however, that Cũa and Em didn't seem to know the name or function of this group, even though they were members, perhaps indicating that other children might have been members but not mentioned it as such:

- Cũa: Yes, it's a Team group.
Q: A Team group? What is this group? Please tell me more. [much prompting]
Em: I don't know about it. Only Cũa knows. [much more prompting]
Q: How many people are there in this group?
Cũa: Many people.
Q: Many students? In both your class and other classes?
Cũa: Anyone in other classes who put on red cloth is a Team-member.
Q: You mean Young Pioneer team?
Cũa: Yes..... There are many activities ... they are holding an assembly to salute to the flag... Holding some campaigns about Young Pioneer team.

Other activities described by children included a Public Health group (Bili), a camping trip where elders taught them to make cut paper flowers; a group where they learn one thing every day, such as the way to pack presents; and a group organised by the teacher to visit sick students:

When a father or mother of any friends passes away, we organise a group to come and console that friend... it's a good thing to do (Ti).

No children explicitly mentioned taking part in **extra classes**, however dialogue in a number of interviews (with Em & Cũa; Bubi & Cu; Huệ) implied that the children *may* have been referring to extra classes when they spoke of learning in groups. For example, Bubi said:

Learning in group is learning in the other's house... there are 6 people. [What can you learn when you take part in it?] I can understand the lesson more (Bubi).

As Em and Cũa describe it, the emphasis in these groups was on them helping other children:

- Em: I help some students who don't learn well ... to learn better.
Q: So what do you learn from joining this group?
Em: It's ... that we should help other friends to learn better.

Similarly, Huệ indicated 'We learn with each other in this group'. If these comments were referring to extra classes it was interesting that the children didn't have a name for the groups and that they perceived the groups as about helping each other, rather than receiving extra tutoring from a teacher or other adult.

A small number of children indicated that they **didn't take part in out of school activities** (Donald; Rũa; Cá; Thúi; Khế; Lac; Minh; Hải).

²⁵ The Young Pioneers (properly named Ho Chi Minh Young Pioneer Organisation) is a youth organisation founded by Communist Party of Vietnam and managed by Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth Party.

5.3 Focus on learning at school

Children were asked to choose one or two of their photos of things that they were proud about learning at school. The interviewers then used these as a stimulus for discussion about learning at school.

5.3.1 What children like best about school

Children were asked to reflect on what they liked best about school and why they liked these things. One of the most common responses related to their **friends and playing games with their friends**²⁶.

I like to see my friends play with each other. They are happy and I am happy, too (Nga).

We like going to school. There's no one to play with at home (Sang & Ti).

I like my friends. Because when I face a difficult exercise, they help me (Trang).

Staying at home makes us sad, so going to school and seeing friends makes us happy (Tiên & Hương).

SUMMARY: The things most children liked best about school were being with their friends, and listening to the lessons of their teachers. For others, school had intrinsic value and provided enjoyment and self-improvement. Having a clean environment with lots of trees was appealing to many.

A smaller number of children mentioned that the best thing about school was their **teachers**; because their teachers were easy to understand (Hue; Rùa), because they gave them knowledge (Khanh; Thúy), or because they were kind (Lac):

I like teachers. Because they teach us good things to become good people (Trang).

I love listening to my teachers' lectures. It's because my teachers' lectures are easy to follow (Rùa).

Because my teachers don't scold me... When we do something wrong, our teachers don't reprimand us and they explain to us again so that we can understand (Lac).

I like learning with the jovial teacher (Chuyên).

For other children, what they liked about school was the subjects (Cửa) and learning and self-improvement itself, since school helped them to 'learn interesting things' (Bướm/Gầy) and 'to improve... it gives me a chance to learn' (Tép; Rùa).

The comments of Bubi and Cu (interview partners) show a particular **concern for the learning of their peers**:

The thing I like best is that everybody in my class learns well... nobody fails... everyone goes on to the next form... because of having class, everybody knows words (Bubi & Cu).

A variety of reasons that children gave for liking school related to **cleanliness and the school environment**, particularly the 'many beautiful trees'(Cúc) surrounding their school which kept the school yard cool (Thúy):

It is the pot plant... We keep the environment clean. We pick up rubbish and throw into the dustbin and then empty it out... There are many activities at school... Clean the classroom and the blackboard... they are very useful for our environment (Cá).

Because the school is clean... It's not contaminated (Hải).

A small number of children also specifically mentioned **resources in the school**, such as boxes for assembling in Technology (Mickey & Donald) and the many pictures which 'make us glad' (Bili). Other notable themes included:

- **Nationalism:** When we salute the national flag... Because during this session we mention many good examples. Also, we mention many bad ones. Because good examples help us (Thúy).
- **Familiarity:** Because I have been studying in this school since I was small (Lan); I love this school because I have had strong attachment to it for 2 years (Len).

²⁶ Data specific to games and play is included in Section 6.4.7.

- **Necessity:** Because we must go to school (Tu).
- **Contribution:** I enjoy sweeping my class... because sweeping can make my class clean (Tép).
- **Sports:** such as football (Rùa; Tồ), volleyball (Tép) and badminton (Nui).

Significantly, Rùa said that she liked school because ‘there are many tables and chairs’, a comment which only gains significance in light of the fact that many children may not have had tables and chairs in their homes.

I enjoy... meeting my friends and my teachers...And I get more knowledge day by day (Len).

5.3.2 Preferred subjects

In most interviews, children were specifically asked **which subjects they liked and why**. The subject favoured by a large number of children (more than 20) was **Mathematics**. Reasons provided were diverse. Some said because it is easy while others said because it is difficult; ‘So, I must study hard to improve’. A number indicated it was a favourite subject because the teacher taught well enough to help them understand.

She will explain clearly and meticulously the difficult operations (Lac).

Interestingly, two children indicated that they felt maths **helped them to study/learn better** more generally: ‘maths can help us have a quick mind’ (Huệ). Two responses emphasised **perceived authenticity and relevance** of mathematics, a point taken up further in Section 6.2.4:

I like to learn Math to sell buffalo (Canh).

Because in the future when I grow up, I will know how to calculate when selling something (Mai).

After mathematics, **Vietnamese** was the next most popular subject. Again, some students indicated that this was because they found the subject easy and also that it helped them to learn better. Other explanations were more complex:

Because Vietnamese is such an interesting subject [and] it is very useful. It helps me practice to have nice handwriting... It also helps me read and write proficiently [and] understand the words [and] do good compositions (Sang).

Vietnamese helps me read fluently and interrupt at the right place (Bili).

Because there are sub-subjects – telling a story, writing, sentences and words... Because I can describe animals, people and landscape when writing an essay. And when learning sentences and words, I learn how to link sentence clause by conjunction. And I can learn how to tell a story which I read or learn (Nga).

Arts-based subjects were also very popular, including music, drawing and handicrafts/technique. Again some comments related to these subjects being easy (Tồ) or because their teacher explained these subjects clearly (Cuc). Children also saw practical relevance in learning to do things such as sew and embroider (Bili), and several particularly liked drawing landscapes and animals. Other comments on why these subjects were favoured included:

Art...because it helps me train my hand (Hue).

Handicrafts...because when I know how to embroider, if I have ragged clothes, fixing it by sewing will be easier (Thom).

Music...because I have a dream to become a singer (Chuyên).

Music helps me at home. I can sing when my parents feel sad (Len).

SUMMARY: Mathematics was predominantly the favourite subject of children interviewed. Other popular subjects included Vietnamese and Arts. Reasons cited for enjoying particular subjects related to the practical relevance of the skills and knowledge to their daily lives. However, children also spoke of liking subjects because teachers explained them clearly or because they received high marks.

Two children mentioned **Physical Education**: 'Because doing exercise helps to strengthen our health' (Duc) and three children mentioned **Science**:

Sciences helps us to know about ... many types of air or substances in the environment (Len).

We can do many experiments at science. For example, we use battery to produce electricity (Donald).

I like science experiments... experiments such as burning sugar and glass (Mickey).

Children often spoke of liking a subject because they did well at it, which was normally indicated by them getting high marks (8, 9 or 10) out of ten.

Q:	What do you choose between being good at mathematics and being able to ride a bicycle?
Thin:	I choose both of them.
Q:	Why?
Thin:	Because if we can ride a bicycle, I can go to school faster. Learning mathematics creates interest to help me do exercise.

5.3.3 What children don't like about school

Children were also asked about things that they *didn't* like about school. Quite a number indicated that there was **nothing they didn't like about school**, although sometimes further prompting led to additional responses. Themes emerging included:

SUMMARY: Children didn't like being scolded or punished at school, particularly when they didn't understand the lesson. Some children also didn't like doing some chores and many were concerned about aspects of their peers' behaviour.

- **Discipline by teachers**

If I don't write down the text, I need to clean the floor (Duc).

To be told off by teachers (Vu).

I don't like to stand by the flagpole because of making noises (Long).

I don't like my teacher to curse me... I am lazy so they curse me (Khé).

I don't like being scolded and punished when I don't understand the lesson... They make me stand... if I don't understand and don't know the lesson, I will get bad mark...I feel sad (Huệ & Bili).

- **Doing chores**

In school what I don't like the most are gathering leaves and studying English... It takes me a long time to gather leaves (Duc).

Clean the floor... (Canh).

I don't like clearing the latrine (Nga).

I don't like that there are so many trees in my school. Because in the season of falling leaves, we have to gather leaves. Because it breaks our back (Nga).

- **The behaviour of others** [a point addressed further in Section 6.1.4]

I don't like that my friends don't want to play with me and they are angry with me (Bili).

I don't like kindergarten children... They make noise when we study (Mai).

I don't like people to chop down trees... I don't like littering as well... Boys often litter after they eat snacks or candies. They litter and don't put rubbish into the dust bin (Sang).

I do not want my friends to quarrel with each other (Của & Em).

- **Aspects of the school environment**

The W.C is not clean and healthy. It is too dirty (Mickey & Donald).

I don't like pictures (Duc).

There are not many pot plants (Donald).

- **Their own performance in subjects**

I don't like receiving bad marks (Mickey).

- **Sports**

I don't like taking exercise in short break. It is too hot. We can get sunstroke. We don't have enough time to do exercise in short break (Thinh & Xanh).

I hate playing badminton... I often have failed blow (Tép).

- **Accidents**

I don't like accidents. [So have any accidents occurred at school?] Someone fell off the second floor. [What have you learnt from this?] We mustn't play over stairs or banisters (Hải).

5.3.4 Subjects children don't like or find difficult

Interviewers also specifically asked children what subjects they *didn't* like or found difficult (noting that the two may not be the same). Many children indicated that they **liked all subjects** however the most commonly mentioned subject children *didn't* like was **English**. More than 14 children (Duc; Huệ; Thủy; Bili; Khế; Chuyên; Hương; Tiên; Mai; Nga; Thuy; Linh; Hải; Tổ) described English as a subject they *didn't* like or found difficult²⁷:

It is difficult because when the English teacher goes into the classroom, we have to say hello to her in English. Class president says "Stand up, please". We have to say morning hello to her like that "Good morning, Miss Y" and in the afternoon we have to say "Good afternoon, Miss Y" (Nga & Mai).

SUMMARY: Children tended to dislike subjects when they perceived they were not good at them or found them difficult. English was mentioned by the majority of children as their least preferred, and hardest to learn, subject. However, all children seemed to view it as important. English was not being taught at School A. Composition was also a difficult subject.

When asked to elaborate on **why English was difficult**, reasons given were that they didn't understand the lessons (Hương), that they had trouble memorising or 'learning by heart many words' (Tổ; Bili), that the words or pronunciation were very difficult (Duc; Huệ; Thủy; Bili; Khế); or that translation was difficult because 'English isn't so similar as Vietnamese' (Linh; Hải):

I must curl tongue, but I can't (Chuyên).

My teachers teach carefully but I still can't understand (Huệ & Bili).

English books are all written in English so I can't read (Hương).

Several children noted that they had **difficulty with their English homework** because either there was no one in their family who could speak English or because the teacher 'forgets to instruct us to do so I find it difficult' (Chuyên & Bili):

I have many things to do at home and I can't learn by heart some English words quickly... I am fretful at English the most. I need to copy homework (Duc).

Bili, Khế and Tiên emphasised that the **English textbook** had beautiful images and was well-designed, but difficult to be read:

I like pictures in it and the speech the people in this book talk with each other (Chuyên).

²⁷ Children indicated that English lessons were not taught at School A (Xanh & Thinh).

Although English was considered difficult by so many children, when the interviewers asked whether they thought that **English was a necessary or useful subject, all those asked responded positively**. Reasons included:

For example if I am in England, I can use it (Bili).

When we are in the other country to learn, if the people there speak English, I can talk with them (Chuyên).

Because I can become English teacher (Duc).

Composition was also cited by a significant number of children (Cuc; Long; Thom; Duc; Xanh; Nga) as difficult. This issue is discussed further in Section 6.2.5, however some reasons cited by children for finding composition difficult included:

It's difficult to practice with words and sentences. [We] need to think, and write much more (Long).

Because I didn't understand much what my teacher explained... My teacher explains fast in Composition. She just gives a quick lecture once...then she allows us to do it ourselves (Thom).

Reasons why children disliked **other subjects** were that **they felt they were not good at them, or that the subject was hard**. For example:

- **Vietnamese** – 'Because I am bad at reading... I am not good at answering the questions' (Trang); 'Because I read incoherently' (Cu); 'Because I cannot read fluently' (Bubi).
- **Drawing** - Because I am bad at drawing... I don't draw beautifully (Khanh); My drawing is very bad (Mickey).
- **Mathematics** - 'Sometimes there are some difficult mathematics exercises so I'm not interested in it' (Len); 'Because there are many exercises that I can't do...Difficult!' (Sang); 'It's a Math riddle and it's hard' (Ti).
- **Music**: When there are short songs, I can learn. However, when there are long songs with different sound levels, I find it difficult (Tuyết).

As with responses to other questions, **children were very ready to accept self-responsibility** for not being good at a subject (an issue addressed in Section 6.1.6).

5.3.5 What helps children learn

A major focus of discussions with children was to ascertain what they perceived as helping them to learn. Eight themes emerged from the data, namely: teachers, help-seeking, textbooks, group work, memorising; resources and pictures, games and fun and self-responsibility. Each of these themes is considered in the following subsections.

Teachers

When asked what helps them learn, children most readily responded that it was their teachers (generally) or specific teachers such as their homeroom teacher. In many cases, children referred specifically to **teachers' lectures and instructions**.

Listening to the teachers helps me study better (Thuy).

Teachers explain for us (Mai).

Because the teacher teaches so that I can understand lessons well (Em).

My teachers instruct it to all of you until everybody in my class can understand the lesson (Bubi).

SUMMARY: Teachers were identified by many children as the most important factor supporting their learning. However, for most it was not the teachers' personality, or the child's relationship with the teacher per se that was identified by children as helping them to learn. Rather emphasis was placed on teachers' lectures and instructions, their examples, demonstrations, explanations and exercises.

Understanding the children's comments here, however, is complicated by issues concerning language translation and the social construction of **teaching and learning** (explored in Sections 6.2.1 and 6.3.3).

Other ways that teachers were seen to help children's learning included:

- **Providing examples and/or demonstrations:** 'She does one exercise as an example'. She gives me suggestion by writing in a rough notebook. I find it easy when she [the teacher] makes a sample (Linh; Nga; Vu).
- **Writing on the board** (Long; Thuy).
- **Getting children to do exercises and revision:** 'She gives me some exercises, if I can't do them, she will instruct me'; 'We revise lesson in the first 15 minutes (Donald & Em).
- **Explaining through questions/hints** and suggestions (Lan; Duc; Tiên; Hương).
- **Providing good feedback** to them when they didn't do well at something. 'She explained and asked me to do it again at home' (Mai).

Notably, it was only when a couple of children were asked directly about the **attitude or disposition of teachers** (as opposed to their practice) that such matters were discussed. Hai, for instance, talked of a teacher who 'teaches gradually' and 'is very kind'. Tiên and Hương added the following:

- Q: Do you think the teacher's attitude makes you study better?
Tiên: Yes, I do.
Q: What attitude helps improve your study?
Tiên: It is ... gentleness... advising.
Hương: It is that she always smiles.

She must give a detailed lecture and make sure that her students understand thoroughly. It means the teacher should teach step by step (Thom).

Help seeking

A key theme in responses relating to 'what helps them learn' was help seeking. Most children seemed to be happy and willing to ask for help from friends (or family in the case of homework). Ti spoke of seeking help from the class monitor. Many also spoke of seeking help from teachers, and most of these children seemed **comfortable to approach teachers and felt they received a positive response**.

Yes, she is very happy and willing to help (Tép).

Once she explained but I didn't understand but the following day, she checked the old lessons and explained it to me again (Ti).

Some children, however, indicated that they had been **scolded or otherwise discouraged from asking for assistance**. The following are examples of teachers' responses when children had asked for help:

If I don't write down the text, I need to clean the floor (Duc).

She says I need to learn by heart in the next time before going to school (Mai).

Other responses were **qualified**. For example, some children indicated that they didn't ask for help from teachers during the lesson but rather asked after the lesson:

I ask my teacher after class to explain more the difficult part... But I don't ask my teacher yet... I don't dare to ask. Because I am afraid (Linh).

If I chat with friends, she will shout at me, but if I ask about lesson, she won't (Nga).

I hardly ask my teacher [Why... are you reluctant?] No, I am not... My teacher explains in an easier way. [Has she ever scolded you for not listening to her?] A few times (Hoa).

SUMMARY: While most children were comfortable seeking help from their friends or teachers, some were reluctant to ask for assistance from teachers, particularly during class time. Some had been scolded or otherwise discouraged from seeking help. Children liked when teachers and friends provided hints and suggestions, rather than doing their work for them.

As mentioned in the previous section, children indicated that the best form of help teachers could provide was to provide **hints or suggestions**. They also described how his friend who sits next to her in the class 'suggests me' when asked for help. When asked whether he ever let Thuy see the answer, Thuy firmly responded 'No'.

Thom: I said to her "Dear teacher, I don't understand this exercise. Can you please explain it to me again?"
Q: Did she reprimand you?
Thom: Yes, she did... But she explained it to me again... I wish she would not reprimand me then she would slowly explain it to me.

Text books

Several children in the first round of interviews mentioned the role of text books in supporting their learning. In the second field trip a more explicit question was asked of the children in relation to this. Children were generally **very positive about their textbooks**. Comments mainly centred on the pictures being beautiful or interesting and that these helped them to learn visually:

SUMMARY: All children were enthusiastic about their text books, particularly appreciating their pictures and indicating how these visually supported their learning. Many children seemed to have difficulty disassociating the text from the subject itself.

I like the cover with interesting pictures and themes... Thanks to the pictures, I can explain and understand more (Huy).

In the lesson of dragon-fly in Vietnamese, there is an image of a dragon-fly. It helps me know more about the dragon-fly. If they describe it, I can imagine what the dragon-fly is... Because they describe things by images (Huong).

Because there are a lot of beautiful picture of the pupil at my age... There are a lot of picture of animals and people (Khế).

Children also spoke positively about the exercises, particularly the mathematics 'puzzles':

Because the textbook has easy puzzles. They help me gain much knowledge.....They help me have more knowledge about the history of former generations (Cúa).

I think there are many interesting puzzles. That are helpful for my intelligence (Vu).

Reading helps us to understand. These writings are made by authors for us to learn... The textbooks which are delivered by the school help us to know more about... our outside life (Len).

Bubi also provided an interesting perspective on the role of the text books in supporting revision, stating that the text book:

...helps us understand faster... when I don't understand the lesson, I will use it (Bubi).

Some children's responses indicated that they **associated the text book with the subject itself**. Hence, because they liked the subject, they liked the text book:

Bướm: I love Fine Arts, because...it helps me draw beautifully.

Gậy: It is [the] Handicrafts one, because it enables me...learn to sew.

The complexity of differentiating the text book from the subject itself, or the teaching of that subject, is illustrated in the following dialogue with Chuyền, who indicated that her favourite subject was music:

Q: Is there a text book of this music?

Chuyền: Yes, there is.

Q: How does it help you?

Chuyền: It helps me have a better voice.

Q: How does it help you have a better voice?

Chuyền: When my teacher tells me to close book, but I forget, then my teacher let me open the book, I can remember.

Q: Do you like the text book of music?

Chuyền: Yes, I do. [because] it provides me with a lot of interesting songs.

Most children indicated that **there wasn't anything that they would like to change** in the text books. Again, however, the theme of **self-responsibility** arose when Linh asked what she would like to do to amend the text books: she replied 'I want to amend some pages torn by me'. After further prompting she added that she would like to make the content shorter and change some difficult lessons (being the only child to make such comments about content).

It was very interesting that Nga wanted to be a publisher when she grew up in order to produce good text books for students:

Nga: I want to be a director of a publishing firm...To publish useful books... for example text books, stories, teacher books.

Q: Ah... Currently, do you find textbooks and teacher books useful?

Both: Yes.

Q: If you publish those books, what is the difference between them and current books?

Nga: The difference is my books have more decorations. For example there are many patterns... and new lessons. Current lessons are old. We have learnt them for years.

Group work

Some children made reference to group work at school supporting their learning. Children's responses gave the impression that group work, in most instances, referred to sitting in a group (often with friends) to do individual work, and so that their friends could help them if they had difficulty (Duc; Em).

Studying in group means...when our teacher gives one question and we study together and we answer later... individually (Tép).

Because when learning in a group, each of us can express our opinion (Nga).

If I know something, I will share with my friends. If I don't know anything, I'll ask (Tuyết).

We often learn about the lessons on that day or ask together about what we don't understand. There are people who are not good at reading or mathematics. I will create an operation for her (Len).

If I don't know anything I can ask teachers and classmates. If someone feels hesitate to ask the teacher, he can ask other members in his group (Hương).

I learn, for example, when my friends don't know but I do, I can tell them. The reversed situation is the same (Hương).

Tuyết indicated that in her class, groups were organised by the children themselves and there were 2-3 children in each group. Rùa indicated they had groups of four. Bướm and Gày indicated their group had 5-6 children and was organised by the class president. Some children, however, when asked whether they worked in groups, seemed unsure or indicated that it happened only occasionally.

The need for children to 'learn' how to learn in a group context was highlighted by Hương who spoke about a photo²⁸ of some older students discussing in a group. When asked what it showed about her learning she reminisced:

I remember long ago when I was in grade 1, teacher asked us to discuss in group, but I didn't know how to discuss in group, and I chatted loudly.... Because I see they discuss softly, not as loudly as I did in grade 1 (Hương).

Some comments from children about group work may have related to extra classes (considered in Section 6.2.4). The following quote, for example, puts emphasis on doing homework, indicating that Donald may not have been referring to group activities in the classroom:

We do homework then check the answers together. If we have any wrong answers, we will do again (Donald).

SUMMARY: Many children spoke of being involved in group work, however in most cases it seemed that 'group work' referred to sitting in a group to do individual work, so that their friends could help them if they had difficulty. There was no indication that teachers set specific activities for group engagement.

²⁸ Photo HT1.18

Memorisation, repetition and practice

A key feature of children's learning was the need to 'memorise'. Several children spoke of difficulties they had learning their work (or textbook) from heart, and that they subsequently didn't do well in their tests.

Repetition and practice were thus frequently mentioned as children described what helped them learn. Emphasis was placed both on their own responsibility to practice, often at home, and the role that teachers played in guiding repetition and practice:

I need to write more at home (Khanh).

I have to prepare the lesson more carefully at home. ... we must learn the notice by heart (Em).

She reads one word, and we repeat one word after that (Duc).

She assigns the homework to us. We need to write 5 times at home (Thuy).

Consideration of memorisation is taken up again in Section 6.2.3

After she teaches, I learn it by heart (Tố).

SUMMARY: Memorisation through repetition and practice was seen as playing an important role in helping children learn. Several children spoke of difficulties they had memorising work and the impact this had on their performance in tests.

Resources and pictures

Not many children talked about the use of teaching support resources or visual stimuli in the classroom²⁹. Those examples which were cited included:

The model of cube, rectangular [prism?]. She also uses the model of triangle and trapezium (Lan & Huy).

They are triangle shapes, square shapes, and parallelogram shapes (Hải).

Pictures of corn trees [and] hats. Picture stories (Hải).

SUMMARY: Very few children talked about the use of resources or pictorial materials in their classroom or local environment. Even when prompted, some children seemed to have difficulty identifying what resources *might* be useful or how these could support their learning.

Only after focused questioning did two children, Huy and Lan, speak about the use of authentic resources being used as stimulus for teaching, as illustrated in Interview Excerpt 8. Even here, though, the purpose of the resources is unclear. Notably, the examples were not illustrative of teaching processes more common in minority-world countries, for example, cutting a piece of fruit to explain fractions.

While very few children talked about the potential²⁹ of such resources, some did mention that they'd like to have more pictures displayed in their classrooms. Many such comments, though, were a result of explicit questioning. An example is provided in *Interview Excerpt 9* with Vu and Long. It took considerable prompting before the children started thinking more creatively. It is notable in this Excerpt that Vu and Long's initial response was to indicate that they wanted displays on their walls of the type of resources that were already on display in their classroom (i.e. rules).

Notably, one child offered an alternative, less positive view about the use of visual displays in the classroom:

In my opinion, we should not decorate much as we will not pay attention to our lessons if we look at those pictures (Lac).

²⁹ Here we exclude discussion of text books or resources such as materials used for sewing.

Fun and Humour

This theme is included as much because of its *lack* of mention by children as a means of supporting learning. Only a very small number of children spoke of fun activities or humour being part of their learning. One pair of children talked about their teacher making learning fun and entertaining: 'I think she is jovial... learning and entertainment at the same time (Chuyên & Khế). Xanh also spoke favourably of her music teacher because 'She is also humorous' (Xanh). In addition, Duc reflected on his time in kindergarten fondly, remembering how:

When I was small, I went to this kindergarten to learn. I played many games there (Duc).

SUMMARY: Very few children mentioned fun or humour being used in the classroom to help them to learn.

Self-responsibility

This recurring theme is addressed in more detail in the discussion section, however it is important to include here as something that helps children learn. Many children placed an emphasis on what they did to help themselves to learn. For example, a significant number indicated that what helped them learn was to '**pay attention** to what my teacher teaches' (Huệ & Bili; Cũa; Donald; Cu) or to '**try their best**' (Len; Cu; Hải). Other children spoke of '**using the textbook** to learn themselves (Nui; Bubi).

SUMMARY: Many children saw themselves – their ability to try their best and to pay attention - as the most important element helping them learn.

Interview Excerpt 8: Huy and Lan discuss authentic teaching resources

- Q: Does your teacher ever use the real objects? For example, a real vegetable or a real flower, or real tools in everyday life. Does she bring them to class to teach you about them?
- Huy: Yes
- Q: For example, what is that?
- Huy: Well, for example, a flower tree.
- Lan: A vegetable.
- Q: For which subject?
- Huy: It's for Handicrafts.
- Q: Well, besides that subject, in any other subject?
- Huy: Science.
- Q: Oh, really. So you like to see the real things like that, or learn about the real objects like that?
- Huy: Yes. Because by seeing the real objects....weteacher will give us questions then we look at the vegetable trees and understand more about them.
- Q: Does it make you easier to understand? You find it easier to understand by looking at the real objects than seeing pictures or listening to the teachers' teachings, right? Is it easier?
- Huy: Yes, it is.

Interview Excerpt 9: Vu and Long describe whether they would like wall decorations in their classroom

[Much preliminary prompting]

Q: So anything else? What do you want to hang?

Vu: Class's souvenirs.

Q: Souvenirs of the class? So do you need to hang the content of lessons? Do you think it's necessary to hang?

Vu & Long: Yes.

Q: Really? So what contents?

Long: It's "do not litter"... and "do not ..."

Q: What are contents? Let me give you an example. There are some things ... some notes of Maths lessons. Is it necessary to hang?

Vu & Long: Yes.

Q: Well, is there anything else?

Long: Hang some difficult puzzles.

Q: You mean some difficult mathematic formula, is that right? What else?... For example, is it necessary to hang some scientific lessons?

Vu & Long: Yes.

Q: Example of what?

Vu: Digestion system.

Q: Digestion system, what system else?

Vu: Water waste excretion system.

Q: Excretion system? What do you hang them for?

Vu: We use them for ...

Q: What do they help you?

Long: To obey.

Q: They help you remember lessons easily, right?

Vu: Yes...it is easy for us to remember.

5.3.6 Homework

Children were asked about whether they had work that they took home from school and, if so, who helped them. They were also asked whether they had difficulties finding time to complete their homework.

All children said that they had homework regularly/each day. Most indicated that, as a general rule, the homework was *not* difficult or only a 'bit difficult' and that it was 'like the exercise we do at class' (Hoa). Those who said their homework was sometimes hard **tended to attribute responsibility for their difficulties to themselves** (as discussed in Section 6.1.6), indicating that it was because they didn't pay attention or listen carefully enough in class (Ti; Khế; Cũa). Only Chuyên indicated that sometimes the teacher 'forgets to instruct us to do so I find it difficult'.

When they had difficulties, most children indicated that they would **ask their parents for help, or sometimes their siblings:**

Because my sister and brother learn much more than my parents and they learn better (Thom).

Khanh and Bubi asked their friends. Other children (such as Vu; Long; Tép; Cá) indicated that when they had difficulty with homework they could ask the teacher (assumable the next day) and clarified that the teacher was happy to explain it to them. Only two children (Duc & Canh) indicated that there was no one at home to help them as their parents were at work. Others simply indicated that they were **able to do it themselves.**

When quizzed about **how their family or friends helped them**, children were firm that they didn't do the homework for them, but rather gave them 'hints' (Cuc), 'suggests me' (Xanh; Khanh) or 'explain for me the way to solve homework' (Mai). Others described it as 'They instruct and I do it by myself' (Khê) or 'They help me by guiding me' (Cu). Other comments made about their family helping with homework include:

SUMMARY: All children had regular or daily homework which they indicated was like the work they did in class. Some said their homework was at times hard but tended to attribute responsibility for their difficulties to themselves (for example, because of not paying attention). When they had difficulty, children would seek help from parents, siblings or friends, or were able to ask their teacher for help the next day. None of the children who were interviewed stated that they had too many house or farm chores to fit in their homework.

They give me some other questions relating to the homework or do some exercise with similar form to it (Thinh).

My parents do one exercise and then I follow (Của).

My mum says that I need to read the textbook carefully again to understand better and know how to solve it, or my mum gives me a hint (Hương).

I ask my sister. She helps me do a calculation as an example and then lets me do the rest by myself (Minh).

My father wrote in the draft and asked me to look to understand (Len).

Only a small number of children (Cuc; Hoa; Donald) felt that they were (sometimes) given too much homework and that they didn't have time to finish it.

Sometimes, I don't have enough time to do all of them... when I have too many exercises... I graze buffaloes in the afternoon. [In the evening I do my homework. Sometimes we don't have enough time... sometimes we do (Donald).

Ambiguously, Cuc and Hoa contradicted themselves later in their interview saying that they *did* have time to complete the homework and that they wanted their teacher to assign more homework: 'I want to have more homework so that I can practice at home' (Hoa).

None of the children who were interviewed seemed to have too many house or farm chores to fit in their homework. However there were some indications that some of their peers and older siblings may do so. Only Thinh indicated that 'If my parents tell me to wash the dishes or I must do too much things and have no time to learn, I also ask them for more time to learn'.

5.4 Social, emotional and physical wellbeing issues

5.4.1 How children feel at school

Children were asked to indicate whether they felt happy/confident at school, and why or why not. As a follow-on some interviewers asked 'What are the things that help make kids feel happy at school?' Generally children indicated that they did feel happy and confident at school. Commonly cited reasons included:

- **Being able to play with their friends:** 'Because there are a lot of friends there.... At home I have no one to play with' (Thinh).
- **Their teachers:** 'Whenever teacher smiles' (Lan). 'Because I go to school and my teacher explains to me. I understand more' (Huong). 'Because I have chance to listen to my teachers' lecture (Mickey); 'My teachers and friends are very kind' (Em).
- **Learning and gaining new knowledge:** 'Because we will have chances to get many useful lessons at school' (Rùa).
- **The school environment:** 'Because of our green, clean and beautiful environment...I feel very glad to come to school...with many trees bringing cool air to me' (Cá); 'Because the school and class have been very familiar to me since I was at grade 1' (Của).
- Getting good marks (Nam).

SUMMARY: Children generally spoke of feeling happy and confident at school. They particularly liked the opportunity to play with friends, be with their teachers and gain new knowledge. The school environment was also very important in influencing their confidence and happiness at school.

A number of children focused on the **helping that they did at school as bringing them happiness.** They provided a long list of cleaning tasks that they did, including sweeping the classroom floor, cleaning the ladders, emptying out the dustbin, taking water and washing the clout to clean the blackboard. When asked why they liked to do these tasks Rua and Tép initially responded 'Because they are light tasks', but went on to reveal that it was because: 'I don't have to come to the yard because the yard is dirty' (Rua & Tép).

Going to school can help me get more knowledge, meet friends and have a better future (Chuyên).

5.4.2 How children feel when they learn new things

Children were asked how they felt when they learnt to do new things either at home and at school³⁰.

There was a great deal of evidence that children **genuinely enjoyed contributing** to domestic work, an issue taken up in Section 6.4.2. They seemed to gain **intrinsic happiness from being able to help their parents** and spoke of feeling 'happy', 'proud', 'glad', 'excited' and 'delighted' that they were able to do the household chores their family members gave them. Just some of their comments included:

I'm so proud because I can help my parents...washing dishes for them (Len).

I feel very happy because I can give my parents a hand (Donald).

I feel glad and proud... Because I have done many things to help my parents (Bướm/Gàỳ).

I'm happy because I can learn to do all the housework at home (Ti).

Because I like helping my parents... So that my parents' work is less hard (Lac).

I'm so happy because I can do this (Rùa).

In this picture, I was washing dishes in the kitchen. I'm so proud because I can help my parents... washing dishes for them (Len).

Because tending the chickens will make them grow bigger (Sang).

It is of me, I was washing dishes.... I am very proud of me when I can do that (Khế).

For others the task itself held an intrinsic value:

Because I can dress [my younger sibling]. Whenever it is winter, and my parents are not at home, I can dress her and that helps her keep warm (Khế).

Whenever I sweep the house, I feel better...If there is any place dusty, I sweep and I feel glad so I find it easy (Chuyên).

Yes, I was very proud and glad because I could ride a bicycle and I must not walk to school (Xanh).

I am very happy and proud of myself (Chuyên).

[Do you feel glad when you can cook rice?] Yes [Why] Because I can eat what I cook (Huệ).

Yet others spoke more of a sense of **pride and personal achievement**:

[Why do you feel happy and proud?] Because now I know how to do the thing that I haven't known before (Lac).

Very happy. Because...I have learnt to do...good work (Cá).

After my dad teaches me to hold dishes firmly, Um, tight, I feel more self-confident (Tiên).

I'm very proud of me... When I came home, I express it to my parents (Xanh).

Only one child indicated that they didn't feel proud of themselves as a learner because they weren't good at all subjects:

I learn Physical Education and Composition best [but] I am not proud of me as I am not good at Math (Ti).

SUMMARY: Almost all children indicated intrinsic happiness from learning new things and seemed to genuinely enjoy contributing to their families' lives through these tasks, in some ways taking for granted their capacity and skills. They were enthusiastic to continue to learn new tasks so that they were able to help their parents and teachers, speaking of feeling 'happy', 'proud', 'glad', 'excited', 'very enjoyable' and 'delighted'. For some, the things they learnt were intrinsically important, while others spoke of the pride and sense of personal achievement which it created.

³⁰ At times this was asked as a closed question [e.g. do you feel happy after you learn...] with a follow-up prompt as 'Why?'.

While feeling glad and proud about their achievement and capacity, particularly their ability to help their parents, the children also appeared to **accept their capacity to perform these roles as not out of the ordinary**, seeming somewhat surprised that the interviewers were interested in, or impressed by, these achievements (see also Section 6.1.1).

I feel very happy after learning how to do such things... I feel delighted. I thank my mother for teaching me to wash the vegetable and sweep the floor (Huy).

5.4.3 Praise and encouragement

The theme of praise and encouragement arose from interviews at School A and was subsequently added as an explicit question for the second field trip. Interviewers asked children whether they received praise and encouragement at home and at school, what form this took, and/or what form of praise or reward they preferred.

Most children indicated that they did receive **praise and encouragement from their parents**:

My parents praise me for being a strong child (Nga).

My parents and my grandparents say that I do well... I feel glad (Hue).

[My parents] said that I am a very good boy. They praise me when I get mark 10 at school... They say I study very well (Mickey).

[My parents] say that I am such a good child (Em).

I feel happy, very happy when I don't make rice burnt. My parents and grandparents praise me (Huong).

Nga spoke of the praise that she received from customers when she cooked Pho in her parents' business: 'I am happy. They say it is delicious' (Nga).

When asked whether their parents' gave them any **rewards** as praise, about one-third of the children said 'yes', another third 'no' and one third were reluctant to respond. The types of things they were given as rewards included clothes, a packet of biscuits, money to buy school equipment. Túy indicated that her mother promised to take her to the market. Some interviewers asked children whether they preferred oral praise or rewards and quite a number indicated they preferred oral praise. Some had difficulty describing the type of praise that they preferred. A humorous perspective on parental rewards was provided by Rùa:

Rùa: Each time, I was awarded a pack of noodles.

Q: Do you love when your parents give you a pack of noodles?

Rùa: No, I don't.

Q: Why don't you love?

Rùa: Because I'm not interested in eating noodles.

Praise and encouragement at school from teachers was mentioned less frequently and was very much focused around marks³¹ and frequently **acknowledged through wall displays**, at both school and home. A number of children photographed or spoke of these displays³² and seemed quite motivated to achieve ten out of ten and have this acknowledged via the '10 mark flower' display.

This picture is of "10 mark flowers" that my teacher wrote. I choose it because I want to have as many ten marks as people on that board do (Len).

SUMMARY: Children really appreciated receiving praise and encouragement from their parents and teachers. Although a small number spoke of receiving gifts or rewards, most were very grateful for oral praise and many comments revealed that children gained intrinsic happiness from helping their parents and teachers. Schools made use of display boards and 'titles' to acknowledge students who achieved high marks. Competitions were also a form of motivation for some children.

³¹ Marking of tasks was always 'out of 10' and so marks such as 9 or 10 were a continual focus of children's comments about praise.

³² See for example the display of handwriting samples which Vu had won [photo CL7-13]; the title of "Uncle Ho good child" which Tuyét and her sister had achieved [photo DS3-5]; or the "10 mark flower" display photographed by children such as Donald and Mickey [e.g. photo DS5-15]) and DS12 – 2.9).

Happy because I get high marks (Vu).

I feel very happy. Because I am praised by the teacher (Em).

Some children also talked about receiving the ‘**title of excellent or good students**’:

I was recognised as excellent student 3 times, from grade 1 to grade 3 (Tuyết).

I only got the title of good student in grade 4... I was awarded notebooks and pens (Hoai).

Because my teacher praises me and at the end of school year I regard excellent title (Xanh).

Children also spoke of being motivated by competitions. For Duc and Canh the Hoi Khoe Phu Dong Sport Festival for Pupils was a key thing that they liked about school, because ‘If I win, I get a prize’ and they could then ‘participate in district or province competition’. It seemed there were a range of competitions to motivate and encourage children:

There was a time when I took part in the contest of telling stories about the good moral example of Uncle Ho. Teacher encouraged me and told me “Don’t be afraid, try your best” (Huy).

When we made the wall-newspaper to welcome Vietnamese Teachers’ Day, my form teacher suggested us some ideas to write articles and draw pictures. [Has your class’s wall-newspaper ever won any prize?] Yes. Teachers said that we did a great wall-newspaper this year... I felt happy and excited (Lan).

5.4.4 Being reprimanded or disciplined

Although the issue of getting into trouble, being reprimanded or disciplined was not the focus of a specific question in the interviews, a number of children chose to make comments about this. Several talked about being scolded or reprimanded **when they had trouble with their work, or hadn’t completed what was required**. Linh, for instance, spoke of **being afraid to ask** for help from her teacher and, although reticent to say what would happen, seemed to indicate that she feared being scolded. Duc also spoke of his desire that one of his teachers help him by being gentle and not scolding. Ti stated that his teacher will ‘reprimand or criticise if I am too naughty’. Nga spoke of a time when she forgot to finish her work before going out to a break and only remembered when the teacher checked her work. The teacher told her she ‘couldn’t go out to play in the next time’. She also went on to talk about being shouted at when talking in class:

If I chat with friends, she will shout at me, but if I ask about lesson, she won’t... When there are so many noises in the classroom, she throws chalk (Nga).

In some schools, discipline was associated with **requiring children to complete cleaning tasks**. Nga, for instance, indicated that she was reticent to talk to her homeroom teacher about the incidents above because she was afraid that the homeroom teacher would ‘take back’ her words to the other teacher who would ‘make us clean the latrine’. Similarly, Canh indicated that if he didn’t write out his text properly he would be required to clean the floor. This association of discipline with cleaning tasks, however, seems at odds with comments of other children who seemed to enjoy the cleaning responsibilities they were allocated, with the exception of cleaning the latrine (see Section 6.1.2).

Despite some children speaking of being scolded, others such as Lac, Lan, Huy and Hâi made the point that they were never scolded and that they liked their school *because* teachers didn’t reprimand them.

Very few children spoke of, or even alluded to, being reprimanded or disciplined at home, although again this was not asked as a specific question. Duc indicated that if he lied about studying to his parents, and his teacher talked to his parents, that his parents would scold him. When asked what he did when this happened, Duc said, ‘If I am very angry, I go out to play’, although his interview partner, Canh, clarified this as ‘run away’. Thom also mentioned in passing being reprimanded by her father.

SUMMARY: While a small number of children reported being scolded or reprimanded at school, such incidents seemed to be isolated and specific to particular teachers. There did not seem to be a culture of children being unduly or overly reprimanded by either teachers or parents.

There was little evidence, then, that children (as a collective) were unduly or overly reprimanded or that they were particularly intimidated by teachers or parents. That said, it may be that children were reticent to report such matters. This is hinted at by the seemingly contradictory comments by Khé:

- (Khé - DS3): I don't like my teacher to curse me.
Q: But you have just said that they are jovial?
(Khé - DS3): I am lazy so they curse me.

5.4.5 Sight or hearing difficulties

Children were asked whether they had difficulty hearing or seeing things in the classroom. This question was included because of concern from ChildFund staff that very few children in the area wore glasses, or were acknowledged as having difficulties hearing or seeing. From the sample of 46 children interviewed all but three indicated that they had no difficulty seeing or hearing. Of these three, two mentioned general issues:

SUMMARY: Only one child self-reported having sight or hearing difficulties. Children generally seemed confident to speak up and tell teachers if the light or handwriting made reading the blackboard difficult.

Sometimes the light is too bright and the blackboard becomes blurred, which is hard to see... [So do you tell your teacher?] Yes... She closes the door (Lac).

...when my teacher wrote unclearly [What did you do?] I ask her. [Did she explain?] Yes, she did (Bili).

Only one child mentioned a personal sight impairment, although the dialogue around this was a little confusing:

- Q: Can you see letter of your teacher on blackboard clearly?
Xanh: Yes, I can.
Q: Have you ever checked your eyes so that you know if your eyes are shortsighted or not?
Xanh: Yes, I have... My eyes were squint and I must have them treated...
Q: Ah, did your doctor tell you why you were squint-eyed?
Xanh: No, he didn't... I was squint-eyed since I was a child.

Xanh's initial response had been 'Yes I can' and it was only because of further prompting that he elaborated on his medical condition. In other interviews the initial response may have also concealed more complex issues.

It is also acknowledged that children may not necessarily have been aware if they did have sight or hearing difficulties, and interviews were only conducted with a relatively limited sample of children.

5.4.6 Non-attendance at school

Children were asked whether there were days when they didn't go to school, in order to elicit whether they ever missed school due to family responsibilities or expectations. We were also interested to know whether their teachers understood the reasons why they were absent from school.

The majority of children indicated that they **only missed school when they were ill**. Interviewers quizzed children as to whether there were any reasons other than illness, and on the second fieldtrip explicitly asked whether there were ever times when they would stay home to help their parents (e.g. 'Have your parents told you to stay at home to take care of your siblings, graze buffaloes or cook rice while they work in the field?'). Almost all children responded 'No'.

SUMMARY: None of the children interviewed indicated that they missed school because of a need to help their families, although an instance of a peer and an older sibling doing so were alluded to. Children did, however, indicate a strong obligation to help their families.

Only five children mentioned reasons other than illness for missing school. These included family problems (Bili); a wedding (Huê) and a grandparent's death (Bubi). Huy and Lan said:

The way I go to school becomes a stream in the rainy season. In the rainy season, the water level rises. Students like me have to stay at home and we don't go to school (Huy)³³.

One child also indicated that they were absent from school on Saturday and Sunday and Tet holidays, when they go to the market.

Thus, no children from the sample interviewed indicated that they missed school to help their families, although two children (interview partners) did say that another child in their class was absent sometimes 'Because his family is poor, and there is no one to tend buffalos but him' (Tiên). Comments at other stages of the interview indicated that Rùa's sister may also sometimes stay home to graze buffalo:

In the afternoon, if my sister goes to school, I'll graze buffaloes. If she doesn't, I'll stay at home. If my sister stays at home, I don't have to do it (Rùa).

That said, the data did indicate that children felt a strong **obligation to help their families**, an issue discussed in relation to respect, obedience and morality (see Section 6.1.5).

All children indicated that when they were away from school they were required to send a note in from their parents to their teacher: 'we must explain [the reason] in permission letter clearly' (Thin). Generally the note was delivered by siblings, friends, or a neighbour that same day.

Playing is like learning because if no one teaches me, I don't know how to play. When the others teach me, it is like when teachers teach me (Khế).

³³ This response was mimicked by HT5.

5.4.7 Games and play

Initial interviews at School A didn't include a question specifically about play, although such games were mentioned by some children. In subsequent interviews an explicit question was added, and children were particularly asked whether they considered play to be learning/studying.

Games which children mentioned playing included:

Hopscotch	Hide and seek.	Badminton
Marbles	Going through the bridge	Volleyball
Jump rope / skipping	Shuttlecock kicking	Football
Tag	Tug of war	Crosswords
Follow-my-leader	Cat and Mouse	The games of squares/Mandarin's boxes (o an quan)
Running	Blind-man's-buff	
Throwing balls	Game of sticks	
Ba mu (Mrs Blind)	Jump box	

Most games seemed to be played at school rather than home. As one child indicated: 'When we finish our P.E lessons, we play such games like rolling balls and Cat and Mouse' (Tép). Only badminton and football were mentioned as games played at home. When speaking of playing at home, children seemed to indicate that they only played for short periods of time: 'At home we spend 10 to 15 minutes playing' (Thin).

Interestingly, **most children indicated that their teacher had taught** them to play these games³⁴. A small number indicated that their **older siblings or friends** had taught them (Tố; Duc; Nga): '[Our friends] serve as a model' (Nga). An interesting exchange with Xanh & Thin indicated that they had learnt to play football by:

...observing then following the others and training with them more times...My friends also helped us and showed us some styles (Thin & Xanh).

When asked how they had learnt the 'laws' (rules) Thin and Xanh indicated 'We watch it... on television'. This was the only time television was mentioned throughout the interviews. The children described how their school had modified the laws, but that they 'knew off-side through television'.

Children were asked whether they thought play was a **form of learning**. A small number of children indicated 'no', but many said 'yes'. Notably, this needed to be interpreted in the light of discussions in the Briefing Sessions which prompted children to think about broader concepts of learning. Some children focused on **learning the rules or strategies to play the game**:

We have to run as fast as possible (Rùa).

Like in shuttle-cock kicking, we need to kick the shuttlecock correctly (Huy).

When we play the game of sticks, we should not catch many sticks or they will hit our head or forehead (Lac).

In tig-tag game, if we don't know how to play, we will lose (Lan).

SUMMARY: Children listed a large number of games that they played, mainly at school. Most games had been taught to them by teachers, and play seemed to mainly occur at school rather than home. Children saw play as an important opportunity to learn not only rules and strategies of the games, but also how to be healthy and how to relate to friends and entertain themselves. Children also identified broader benefits of play for their confidence, self-esteem and learning skills. Importantly, children identified that they needed clean and cool places to play.

³⁴ Conversations with the Vietnamese researchers indicated that play was likely to be associated with formal games not spontaneous activities. It was discussed that children in rural areas were more likely to engage in these more spontaneous and playful activities than those in the city where there was more considerable pressure to study in out-of-school time.

Others linked play with **learning to be healthy**:

Because playing games enables people to be healthy (Cá).

Playing games...makes us healthy and high-spirited (Bướm/Gàỳ).

Others spoke of play as an opportunity to learn to **relate to friends** or entertain each other:

Because we learn to know, and we play to entertain (Canh).

When I'm sad, I can ask my friends to play and I can learn from them (Len).

I can learn the games which my friends like playing and then I can play with them (Bubi).

Others emphasised the broader benefits of play for their **confidence, self-esteem or learning skills**:

It means we must try (Tố).

[The games of squares/Mandarin's boxes] requires good memory (Long).

We need to think when playing (Vu).

Several children (Thinh & Xanh; Khanh; Chuyên) saw play as an **important means of relaxing** when they were tired or stressed, for example, after a difficult maths lesson:

Because it helps me relax and when I learn, I can get more knowledge (Chuyên).

A number of children mentioned in their interviews the importance of having appropriate, **clean and cool places to play**.

[Why do you like the line of trees?] Because we can play under the shade of the line of trees (Ti).

In one interview the children were asked whether they preferred learning or playing. Both indicated that they preferred to learn because:

Learning helps me know more (Lac & Thom).

5.5 Relationships and learning

I like to be loved by teachers and friends. Because being loved by other people makes me happy (Hương).

5.5.1 Do teachers like school and children?

Children were asked whether they felt that their teachers liked school, and how they could tell. Some interviewers prompted with a following on question related to whether children thought teachers liked them (i.e. their students).

The majority of children believed that their teachers did like school and them, offering responses such as that the teachers loved the school and class; or that '...teachers don't teach here if they don't like this school' (Hương). Some children indicated that they knew that teachers liked the school because they **physically turned up** each day or each year or because they **don't say bad things about the school** (Tiên; Bubi; Cu; Hương; Donald; Tép; Huy).

Some children spoke of **teachers' specific teaching strategies or patience** or their ability to bring children new knowledge as signalling that they liked children and school:

Because the teachers are dedicated to teaching us... The teacher has a lot of knowledge and she uses her knowledge to teach us (Em).

SUMMARY: Almost all children believed that their teachers liked school, and liked them as children. They thought this because teachers turn up at school, use teaching strategies that help them, and seem committed to their future. Many children seemed to feel a close and warm relationship with their teachers. This was most likely when the teacher smiled a lot, was friendly and kind and didn't scald them.

If I read something wrong, she will correct for me (Ti).

When she dictates the text to us, she speaks slowly (Sang).

If I don't understand the lesson she asks me "do you understand? Do you need me to teach you again?" (Khế).

She will explain about things that students don't understand (Hương).

Other children recognised that their teachers were **committed to helping them do well in life**.

Because they teach me with all their heart... They want to help us become the people who can do something good for society (Huệ & Bili).

Because they always want to teach us to become good people in the future (Ti & Sang).

They always give us useful advice and want us to study hard (Lan).

For a good number of children, however, it was the teachers' **personal warmth** which indicated that they liked being at the school:

Every morning I go to school, I always see our teachers smiling (Nga).

They are very nice to us (Khanh).

Because I met [my teacher] before. I saw that she looked sad, but after she teaches here, I see that she is always jovial and smiles (Chuyên).

Because my teachers really love us and my school and my class... They are very friendly (Cá).

They are very kind and that make them teach better (Xanh).

I'm so happy to study with [my teacher]. She often praises and smiles to me (Tuyết).

If some child cries, the teacher will comfort him (Tiên & Hương).

The depth of Len's relationship with her teacher is humorously expressed in the following:

In 3rd form [the Teacher] taught me. She really loved my class...loved us. In break time, she often asked me to pull out her white hair (Len).

Children's responses were at times quite **complex, nuanced and sometimes contradictory**. This is indicated in the following dialogue with Tuan and Tép and also *Interview Excerpt 10* with Nui and Tổ:

Q: Do your teachers often smile with you?

Both: Yes.

Q: They do? Are they friendly?

Both: Yes.

Q: So why did you say that they were not friendly a few minutes ago?

Tép: They are not friendly but they smile with us.

Three children (from School A) saw teachers' 'liking' of school as **directly related to the behaviour of students**: 'because pupils pay attention to the lecture' or 'because pupils here are very obedient'. Another child described it as positive that the teachers 'hardly scold or shout at us' (Huy). Vu's comment that he knew teachers liked children 'Because my teacher helps us clean the WC' needs to be interpreted in the context of the terrible condition of school toilets and the fact that children are sometimes given the role of cleaning them.

A small number of children indicated (sometimes indirectly or ambiguously) that they thought their **teachers didn't like school**, often because their teachers didn't smile much (Len & Tuyết; Tép).

Their behaviour shows that they teach us to become a good person (Bubi).

Interview Excerpt 10: Nui and Tó discuss how they know their teachers love school

- Q: Do you two think teachers love school?
Both: Yes
Q: How do you know teachers love school?
Nui: I think myself
Q: You think yourself? What do teachers show?
Nui: Protecting the environment
Q: How do teachers protect the environment?
Nui: Don't destroy forests and that's all
Q: Oh, don't destroy forests. What else? Are they happy?
Nui: Yes
Q: Are they angry?
Tó: Yes
Q: Angry, too? When?
Tó: When talking
Q: Ah, when you talk too much?

5.5.2 Communicating with teachers

The study was interested to explore the nature of the relationships between children and teachers. Children were asked whether their teachers ever talked to them like they would talk to other adults³⁵. If children needed further prompting interviewers asked whether their teachers talked about things other than school work or made them feel important or special as a person – like you have important things to say³⁶. Children were asked to provide examples of when this happened.

Some examples provided by children were more about **teachers talking to them (or reprimanding them) as children**, often offered in response to the prompt about whether teachers talked to them in breaks.

She advices us not to fight (Duc).

My teacher told me...if I don't know, she would explain more carefully (Cá).

For example, when I do something wrong, they tell me to solve the problem and told me that I shouldn't do that again (Chuyên).

When I have short break, and I play hopscotch in front of class, and we make my class dusty, my teacher tells me to play on the school yard (Khế).

They just say that we must try to learn well (Cu).

During breaks they ask whether I do housework... I feel happy (Tó).

She reminds me to practice writing more at home (Hoa).

Other examples showed that teachers **talked to them about matters other than school work**, such as the teacher's own life, or things of current interest:

She told us about poor families, floods, runaway hostage and drifting downstream (Duc).

She told us about her story when she was young (Thuy).

She talked about old stories.... I felt important (Khanh & Trang).

SUMMARY: Most children did feel that their teachers talked to them, at times, as adults, although for some children examples of this included being reprimanded in the school breaks. Other examples, however, illustrated a genuine care by teachers for their students. Children really valued when teachers talked to them about matters other than school work, shared personal or topical stories or used humour and recognised that this helped them to learn. Some children indicated that teachers didn't talk to them in this way.

³⁵ This question, and the phrasing of it, was suggested by the Centre for Children and Young People's Advisory Group, Young People Big Voice.

³⁶ Interviewers also prompted in a number of other ways including: Q: Do they ever talk with you about stories not related to school or studying? Q: Do they ever talk the topics not related to studying such as current affair?

She said she had a sticky proof pan. She poured oil into it and then turned on the gas cooker. Then she went out, held her baby, she forgot to turn it off. Thus the pan was broken (Nga).

Other examples, however, showed a more personal relationship with teachers and their **genuine care for children and their families**:

For example, it is like “How are your parents?” ... It is to care about our health (Long).

They ask me where I am from...They ask what my parents' names are... They also ask how many members there are in my family (Cuc).

For example they asked how my parents are (Thinh).

They often ask me how many people there are in my family (Bubi).

She asked after my family... or asked about my grandpa's health (Len).

For others, it was teachers' **use of humour** that made them feel like they were being talked to as adults:

Because she is very jovial. She usually talks about the other thing to begin the lesson better (Chuyên).

She usually talks about something funny... she jokes (Hue).

Generally children were very positive about being **talked to like they were adults**, because:

I am in the forth class. Everyone considers me as an adult and I also want my teachers to talk with me as if I were an adult (Chuyên).

I want them to talk with me because I want to have a closer relationship with them... so that I can remember what they teach better (Khế).

I feel very happy when talking to my teachers (Em).

Because they want to understand my family and my studying (Bubi).

Because they want to know about my studying... And my family (Cu).

Once, the teacher in charge of Teenagers Team said that students of grade 5 had to carry bags to school to help... I felt happy because my teacher considered us youth, young people (Huy).

A small number indicated that teachers didn't talk to them in this way (for example, Tép; Lac & Thom). One child (Nga) clarified that some of their teachers communicated in this way, but others did not. Those who said that their teachers didn't talk to them 'as adults' indicated that they would like their teachers to treat them in this way:

Because if they care about us, when we have difficulty, they will show us the solutions (Thom).

Interview Excerpt 11 indicates how **complex** children's responses to this question could be, and their sense of what it means to be treated like an adult.

Interview Excerpt 11: Ti and Sang speak about their teacher communicating to them and how it makes them feel

- Ti: She never talks or chats during classes but when the lesson is over, she will talk to us.
- Q: Really, what does she say to you, Ti?
- Ti: She will reprimand or criticise if I am too naughty.
- Sang: She tells me to practice writing at home.
- Q: When your teacher talks to you, do you feel that you are considered an adult?...
- Sang: She talks to me as if I am an adult
- Q: Do you like being treated like that?
- Both: Yes, I do.
- Q: Do you feel that you are important?
- Both: Yes, I do.
- Q: How are you important? How are you important to her when she talks to you like that?
- Ti: Because I am her pupil.
- Q: Ah, because you are her student. She cares about you, right?

5.5.3 Perceptions on teaching as a career

Children were asked whether they thought it would be good to be a school teacher, and if so, why or why not³⁷. **All children thought that teaching was a good job.** Most explanations described what teachers do, perhaps indicating children's perceptions of the **intrinsic value of the work**:

SUMMARY: All children perceived teaching as a good career. Most spoke of the intrinsic value of helping children to learn and the satisfaction of seeing their pupils succeed.

Because teacher can help children learn well (Duc).

Because a teacher can teach children to read and do calculations (Cuc).

Because teachers can explain the lessons carefully to their pupils (Tép).

Because the teacher can share knowledge with students (Của).

Because teachers teach us good things (Hải).

Because teachers help poor pupils and they help students become good citizens in the future (Thủy).

Two children indicated that they perceived teaching as a good career because of the **explicit enthusiasm of their teachers**:

Because teachers are very enthusiastic... to help us study better (Em).

Because teachers say so (Tố).

Only one child mentioned **extrinsic rewards, namely salary** as the reason why teaching was a good career (Cahn), and another described it as an alternative to agricultural work (Thin).

Khế and Chuyên were explicitly asked why they *didn't* want to become teachers:

Because I also have a dream. I also want to become a teacher, it is also a good job, but being a teacher sometime I will feel sad. If I was a doctor, I could cure others and if I was a police[woman], I could protect our country and there is no criminal any more (Khế).

I also respect this job but I don't like being a teacher because teachers sometimes get trouble. For example, when the pupils don't pay attention to the lesson and they argue. But a teacher also can have happiness when the pupils have good learning result. However, I want to become...[a tailor] (Chuyên).

Lan:	A good teacher is honest, gentle and kind. She hardly shouts at students.
Huy:	A good teacher must be righteous; she must set an example for students, never shout at student and explain to them problems that they haven't understood so that they can understand them.

³⁷ Note that there was some confusion as a result of this question, with some interviewers asking whether children wanted to *become* teachers, which subsequently influenced responses to the later question relating to their aspirations for the future (see Section 5.6.3).

5.5.4 Parental involvement with the school

Children were asked whether their parents ever got involved in aspects of their schooling and whether they liked it when they did. Most responded that their **parents did get involved in a range of activities at school**, the most common being: attending parent meetings; voluntary work on school buildings and grounds; to watch them study or to pick them up when it rains. Two children mentioned their parents helping out on a school camp. Other comments included:

...when we come to school to rake the ground, my parents will bring the rakes... And they also dredge the canal to make it deeper. Because it helps my school ground [become] nicer... The school ground will not be dirty anymore (Thom).

My parents go to the school to check whether I learn well (Tố).

Some work such as bringing trees to school to make the fence (Huy).

They often check our exercises at class everyday when we come home from school... to see whether I write sufficiently or not (Ti).

A number of children were very aware of their **parents' monetary contributions (school fees)**. Examples of such comments included:

Contributing money... For expenses on water, electricity, construction and security (Nga).

For example: building wall, class and school, pay for electricity fee [and] pay for fee such as health inspection... they must pay for building school (Huệ & Bili).

Most children indicated that they **liked their parents being involved**, citing reasons such as wanting their parents to know more about their study, or how well they were doing, and because parents were then better able to help them learn:

We are still young, so the adults... can do many things to help us (Em).

Because my parents are interested in my studying (Bubi).

While it wasn't a specific focus of the interviews there were two occasions where the discussion provided an insight into children's discussions with their parents about their schooling. Hoa, for example, talked of her parents asking whether she studied well at school or not and asking whether she enjoyed playing with her friends during recess.

On some occasions, where a child had indicated that their parent *wasn't* involved in school activities, an interviewer would ask whether they would like their parents to be involved. Responses included:

They say that they are busy so they can't (Bili).

They say that if there is a performance of dancing, then tell them to come (Huệ).

They said that they were busy with house work. When they had free time, they would join in (Chuyên).

Only one child was reserved and indicated that he didn't want his parents to be involved, saying initially that 'I am afraid that my parent will be tired' (Canh) but then going on to indicate that:

Because teacher can tell my parents about my studying in school. If I lie, my parents will scold me (Canh).

SUMMARY: Most children reported that their parents were very active with their school, particularly attending parent meetings and doing voluntary work on school buildings and grounds. Children very much liked their parents being involved in these ways. A number of children mentioned their parents paying school contributions and perceived this as a way that they were involved with the school. Some children indicated that their parents were too busy working to be involved with the school.

5.6 Thinking about their futures

5.6.1 Suggestions to make school better for children

Children were asked, 'If you had a magic wand (or could make a wish) and could change something about school to make it better for children, what would you change?' This question was intended to identify children's priorities for change at their school.

Generally **children were initially reluctant to make suggestions**. Many said they didn't want to make any changes, but after further prompting would start suggesting ideas. From those who did answer without prompting, the most common response related to **school toilets** (see also *Interview Excerpt 12*):

I want to change the convenience (công trình vệ sinh) ...because there are many students who don't know where ... to go to stool, so they delay, they dare not... er er ... (children laugh) ... have a pee. This place is so bad-smelling that they don't want to enter (Hương).

My school should be more spacious and we should have a better toilet. (Donald).

I only use the toilet when I have bellyache (Lac).

Children wanted their schools to be '**cleaner and nicer**' (Thom), an issue taken up again in Section 6.1.2. Cuc spoke of not wanting the classroom walls to be dirty (Cuc). Even when describing what it might mean to 'decorate the school' Vu said 'it means it must be clean'. Many children spoke of wanting their **school yard to be cemented**.

I want to pave the school yard with cement (lát bê tông)... If not, when we play on the school yard, we will face the dust carried by the winds (Tiên).

I wish my school would have a yard paved with cement, in order that we could do physical exercises during rainy and stormy days (Hương).

The school yard is very dusty... I want to have a foundation (Hải).

I wish the school ground will be cemented so that the mud won't stick on the students' shoes when they come into classrooms. If there is no cement, the classroom will become dirty again after it is swept (Huy).

Providing vivid insights into how the muddy school yard affected children, Rua spoke of enjoying the many tasks they were given to do in breaks because the yard was too dirty to play. Thom described one of her photos as 'at the break, my friends don't play with dirt', going on to explain how they needed to try hard not to make their clothes dirty during recess (Thom). Think and Xanh's dialogue (*Interview Excerpt 12*) about their school toilets also revealed that their school was short of **water**.

Quite a number of students wanted **more trees and pot plants**:

Trees make the environment clean, green and more beautiful (Cá).

Because in summer the weather is very hot. If we have more trees pupils can stand under their shadow to be cool when they go to school early (Len).

Other suggestions related to the **condition of buildings** more generally:

We will destroy an old school and build a new one (Duc).

Some parts of the [classroom] wall are going to collapse... Others are going to crack (Vu & Long).

I hope no hole for school. [What else] Fans are not out of order (Khanh).

I wish the school which I'm studying at would be newer ... and its banisters would be stronger for us to lean on (Em).

SUMMARY: Children initially showed reluctance to identify suggestions for change at their school and also tended to attribute responsibility for many of the issues with their school environment to the behaviour of their peers. Toilets, sanitation and cleanliness were major issues for children, affecting their ability to play in breaks and their willingness to go to the toilet. Also mentioned by some children was a desire for more teaching resources or equipment.

The ceiling isn't cracked... Bricks don't fall down... (Nga).

I hope that my school will be rebuilt... Or painted one more time. That also makes our school more beautiful (Thin & Xanh).

I want to build more stairs in my classroom (Nga).

A small number of children commented on the need for **more resources or equipment**:

I wish there would be more equipment in Equipment Office (Của).

I think school must have enough teaching and studying tools to help us study better... In our Handicrafts classes, we can't grow trees (Cuc).

I want the school assembling equipment to be improved. We are lacking many of them (Donald).

Some interviews prompted children to consider the '**decoration**' of the classroom itself. Some children were positive about classrooms being better decorated, elaborating that 'its colours must be more exciting' and 'I want flowers in my classroom. Paper flowers stuck on the wall' (Long). *Interview Excerpt 9* with Long and Vu is particularly interesting as it indicates the issues children could have with presenting specific suggestions for change.

Despite the quite terrible state of toilets and school yards³⁸, the children still tended to **under-emphasise the issues, or attributed responsibility for the problems to their peers** (discussed further in Section 6.1.4).

It's dirty and there are some cracks. It's dirty because there are many leaves falling off (Long & Vu).

They are not good because some friends still draw on the toilet's wall, which makes them dirtier. Some friends throw stones into the toilet (Thom).

I wish that at my school, everybody will try to learn and not fight (Bubi).

I wish my friends make attempt to study and not to fight and... everyone must keep environmental sanitation (Cu).

No stationery destroying in class (Nui).

I hope that there were a lot of people learning well... everyone must pay attention to what teacher teach carefully and learn the lesson by heart [and after prompting] we always must throw garbage into dustbin. We shouldn't throw garbage disorderly (DS Huệ & Bili).

The painting colour is bleached and every one usually writes on the wall and makes it dirty. I want school to have a cleaner environment and every one doesn't write on wall any more (Chuyên).

From my point of view, we should not draw on the walls (Lac).

Other suggestions included a parking lot for bicycles (Của) or that they be taught English (Lac)³⁹.

I hope that this school will be better and all pupils learn well (Khế).

Some children had initially misunderstood the question, and responded by articulating more general hopes and dreams. These responses were particularly poignant:

I wish that I would help my parents do more work in the farm and earn more money to help them (Thom).

No tree destroying, forest destroying and waste throwing (Nui & Tố).

Peace in the world (Khanh).

³⁸ In schools where ChildFund had not yet been involved in supporting school building activities.

³⁹ English was not yet taught at School A.

Interview Excerpt 12: Think & Xanh talk about their school sanitation

Think: I want to make my school more beautiful and have sanitation
Xanh: And suitable wash basin.
Q: So now does your school have one?
Both: Yes, it has but it is still not comfortable.
Xanh: There is no water there.
Q: Ah, no water there. That means it is just dry, has no water.
Xanh: No water to defecate and urinate.
Q: Do you know where to take water?
Xanh: We must pump from well.
Think: Well, in secondary school near our school.
Xanh: That well is used to wash hand.
Q: Ah, that means secondary has a well, but it still does not lead to your school, isn't it?
Xanh: Yes, it is.
Both: But it is used to drink. Teachers don't let us wash hand and foot so that it is clean and they will boil it to drink.
Q: Ah, they boil water from that to drink. Why don't they use it for hygiene? Because you are short of water or is not comfortable?
Xanh: Because we are short of water.
Think: The sanitation is also uncomfortable.
Q: Ah, is the place designed to flush?
Xanh: No, it is just designed to cover by ashes.
Q: Do you feel comfortable when you defecate and urinate there?
Think: No, I don't.

5.6.2 What adults can do to help teachers become better

The interviews sought suggestions from the children as to how teachers might be assisted or supported to become better at what they do. This was asked as: 'If you were a grown up and given the job of helping teachers become better teachers, what would you suggest/do/say?'

This was a particularly **difficult question** for the children to understand and answer. Some interviewers attempted to assist by asking children if they knew a particular official from the Education Department, so that they might imagine they were him. Most children said they didn't know this person. Other strategies included asking the child to imagine being a District Chairman or Vice Chairman (a role they seemed to be more familiar with) or Prime Minister. An example of the misunderstandings and difficulties of this line of questioning is provided in the following exchange:

Q: But if you grow up and do something or hold a very important position... do you know what an important position is?
Ti: No.
Q: It means you are assigned a position and you have power, like a leader. For example, your principal.
Ti: I want to be a teacher.
Q: Ah, I know you just want to be a teacher. But I am giving an example in which you are a higher position, you are a leader, at that position, you are able to help teachers do their work better.
Ti: Then I will help teachers teach well so that the students will learn better.
Q: Yeah, that's right! But what do you do to help teachers do their job, teach well?

SUMMARY: Children had difficulty placing themselves in the position of an adult to make suggestions on how teachers could be assisted to teach better. School resourcing and concern for the general wellbeing of teachers were main suggestions, with some children suggesting training to help teachers explain things more carefully or slowly for children. Accuracy was also identified as important.

Another strategy was to build on something the children had already said, such as a subject they experienced difficulty with. This was also rarely successful, as in the following exchange:

- Q: For instance, Thúy finds it hard at English. What do you want teachers to do to help you study more easily?
Cá: I ask my teacher.
Q: Yes. But I mean what do you want teachers to do to make the lessons easy to follow in the future? In the future means when you go to work. What do you want?
Thủy: I help her... translate into Vietnamese.

At times, children said that their teachers were **already good teachers**. Others, after much prompting, were not forthcoming with an answer, or indicated that the question was too hard. Some children were not able to move beyond responding from the perspective of a child, again raising the theme of **self-responsibility** for the way teachers teach (see Section 6.1.6):

- I try my best to learn well... [further prompting] Prepare well before going to class (Trang & Khanh).
I think pupils should pay attention to their teachers' sayings (Rùa).
Uhm...I will learn well (Hue).
We will be more obedient and obey them (Xanh).
I should listen to them (Len).

When children did understand the question and were able to respond, a number of themes emerged. Some focused on **funding of schools and access to resources**, presenting ideas similar to those raised in response to the question about improving their school:

- I will donate money to build a school... For the teachers (Long).
I will rebuild the school (Thuy).
There should be more teaching tools in some subjects... Handicrafts and Fine Arts (Hoa).
I will visit school, class and teachers... I will ask for money to help them so that they can buy book and notebook (Huê & Bili).
If I become an official, I will collect money to sponsor my school... to make it more beautiful... I will buy all kinds of books... and text books for the teachers to consult (Em).
When school fund is not much, I will put money into that to make this school cleaner and more beautiful... I also will delegate some teachers to work here so that my teacher must not work hard (Chuyên).
I will try my best to help my school. For example, I will make a cement fence around my school (Huy).
If we had a lot of money, we would tell someone to build and paint school again to make our school more beautiful so teachers would love our school more and then they would teach better (Xanh).

Quite a number of children showed genuine concern for the wellbeing of their teachers:

- I help them and poor children... I will help them when they are ill... When she is sick, my friends and I come to see her. I will help her to do house chores (Canh & Duc).
I would like my teacher not to be tired... Uhm...By doing physical exercises with her (Cá).
I will let the good teacher travel so that they can relax, and help the others learn more so that they can teach better (Khế).
We will encourage my teachers... By meeting and encouraging them. I will meet my teachers and support them (Cu & Bubi).

Only a small number of comments related more specifically to **teaching techniques or strategies** or the need for further **training**.

- I will ask them to explain slowly and carefully for us to understand (Thom & Lac).
I want them to explain more carefully... for me to remember (Len).
If I am at a higher position, I will tell the teachers to do their job better, to teach the students well (Sang).

If I attend any training course somewhere, I will definitely explain to them and give that lesson to them when I come back (Ti).

I will train professional teachers... I will tell the teachers to teach their students more easily to understand (Donald).

Two children placed a strong emphasis on **accuracy and 'correcting' teachers** when they were wrong:

If the teachers teach something wrong, we should correct them (Ti).

If my teacher writes by mistakes, I will tell her that she's wrong (Cá).

One child specifically talked about their preference for having a **single teacher rather than multiple teachers** for different subjects:

They need to attend more classes, for example English and some subject... That means one teacher just teach one class, they must not come in school office too much (Xanh).

5.6.3 Children's aspirations and the value of schooling for their futures

Children were asked what they would like to *be* or *do* when they were grown up. Figure 6 summarises their responses⁴⁰.

Having thought about what they would like to do when they grow up, children were then asked whether they felt that their present study at school would help their future. Most interviewers specifically asked whether schooling would help them to become a doctor, teacher, policeman etc. The aim of asking this question was to ascertain if children felt their schooling was relevant and useful for their future.

Some comments made by children were **specific to their preferred career**:

If I become a policeman in the future, previous study may help me do some documents or applications when needed (Huy).

Knowledge to examine patients (Khanh).

...to catch criminals. If they don't stop when we blow a whistle, we need to pursue them (Duc).

Learning moral education can help me have good morality and have good behaviour so that the patients respect me (Khé).

Those wanting to be teachers referred to the need for knowledge that they could impart to their students, but some also emphasised the need to be good at studying:

When I am good at studying, then when I will be a teacher, I will impart what I have studied since I was small to kids (Ti).

To become a teacher, we must learn well (Cu).

The **necessity to pass exams** was a recurring theme in children's responses:

Will make me more confident in the exams (Vu).

It will ... make sure that I will pass the university entrance exam (Long).

SUMMARY: Most children had quite clear views on what they would like to do when they grow up, with professional roles such as teaching, policing or medicine being the most frequently cited. Only two children mentioned roles more representative of the agricultural work typically done by adults in their hamlet. All children saw value in their learning at school for their future careers, particularly concerning the importance of literacy and numeracy, practical skills such as sewing together with morality. The need to pass exams was only mentioned by two children.

⁴⁰ In the early interviews at School A, however, this question was asked *after* that related to whether they thought teaching was a good career and hence children from this school may have been influenced to respond that they wanted to be a teacher.

Others put a stronger emphasis on **skills which were practical** and necessary for life generally.

We need to learn composition because when we grow up, we can write letters to ask after our grandparents (Duc).

It helps me to calculate and to read (Linh).

I always must read book to get knowledge (Huệ).

The subjects such as technique can help me know how to sew and embroider and when I grow up, I can sew for the poor children so that in winter, they can keep warm (Chuyên).

Again, **a small number of children had difficulty answering the question**, although their comments are insightful. Duc, for instance, was asked whether school would help him to become a policeman. After much pausing and prompting he replied 'When I get mark 10... I will be happy and joyful in the future'. Em was asked whether studying at school helped her to pursue a career as a doctor. Her reply was 'You have tried very much to teach me well so that I can reach my dream'. Tồ said that learning about the need to wear a helmet when riding a motorbike would help him in his career as a policeman, although when asked whether he could become a policeman and a soldier without studying he indicated 'yes'.

Figure 6: Children's career aspirations

Job	Respondents	Examples of Explanations as to why
Teacher	13 responses (see footnote)	Because I can teach children, they will learn well and they can do something good to society (Bili) Because teachers can explain the lessons carefully to their pupils (Rùa) Because the teacher can share knowledge with students (Của) Because a teacher can teach students of my age next year to study better ... than us now (Hương) Pupils will love me (Thinh)
Policeman/ woman	8 responses	To arrest bad people (Long); Because a police can catch criminals (Duc) Because I can go out and arrest wood-cutters (Thom) I want to be someone who can protect my country (Huy)
Doctor	7 responses	Because being a doctor, we can examine patients (Tép)
Artist/ painter/ singer	3 responses	I like to draw (Linh)
Soldier	2 responses	Because soldiers are very strong (Lac)
Scientist	1 response	Because I can invent things (Vu)
Tailor	1 response	
District chairman	1 response	
Director of a publishing firm.	1 response	To publish useful books. For example textbooks, stories, teacher books (Nga)
Worker	1 response	
Do business	1 response	I will trade in vegetables (Hải)

Q: Ah, do you think that both ways of study: at home and at school are necessary for you?
Huy: Yes, it's very essential for us when we are mature
Q: Ah, why do you think that it's necessary?
Huy: Because when we are grown up, if we want to build a house, we must keep it tidy... Or when we carry out any projects, we need to learn about it then we will gain some knowledge.

5.7 Involvement in the project

5.7.1 Pairs or individual interviews

All children had indicated in the Briefing Sessions that they wanted to be interviewed in pairs. At the end of the interviews children were asked to provide feedback on this choice⁴¹. All children except Hue indicated that they liked being interviewed in pairs. Comments included:

Because it is good for both of us (Nga).

When there is a difficult question, I can ask my friend (Huê & Bili).

When we have a discussion in pair, if I don't know the answer, the other can help me (Thom).

Because when meeting in two, if there is a question you ask but I don't know, I can ask my friend to answer (Khế).

The interviewer did not enquire further with Hue regarding why she might have preferred an individual interview. While the majority of children liked/preferred to be interviewed in pairs there were some issues with the quality of the data provided, a matter taken up in Section 6.3.3.

SUMMARY: Children preferred to be interviewed in pairs because this provided a more comfortable and less pressured context for the interviews.

5.7.2 Feedback on involvement in the project

Children were asked what they did or didn't like about being involved in the project, and how they felt about their involvement. The majority of children enthusiastically spoke of liking the **camera, taking the photographs and seeing their photos at the end**. The photo-elicitation strategy is discussed further in Section 6.3.1.

Others indicated that they liked having the **opportunity to talk to the interviewers**:

I like ChildFund staff. You are very funny (Nga).

I like it best when I talk to you (Hoa).

Because discussion like this is easy to understand and you don't talk quickly (Thom).

Because I have a chance to exchange ideas with strangers (Lac).

Joining in this project gives me chance to talk to you (Len).

Because I can know how to take photographs, and I like to talk with you because you are humorous and kind (Tiên).

Because you are very gentle, not like other (Khế).

Some children particularly spoke of how they **appreciated that someone was interested in listening to them**:

Because I say and you listen, and when I don't understand, I can ask you again (Huê & Bili).

Because you come here to find out my learning at school and at home (Bubi).

Because my study is cared for by you (Sang).

I like this project because it concerns our study at home and at school (Huy).

SUMMARY: Children enjoyed immensely the opportunity to take photographs and to talk to the interviewers and they appreciated that adults were interested to hear their views. Children also indicated that they had learnt from the interview process, particularly from thinking further about their own learning. There was nothing that children indicated that they didn't like about the interviewing process.

⁴¹ Although notably, given that they were still in the pair when asked this, they may not have felt able to comment if they had not enjoyed being interviewed with their partner.

Interestingly, a significant number of children focused on the **learning outcomes for them** as a result of being involved in the project:

Later, if I take part in any examination and I must answer the question like that, I can answer easily... Because I answered it so I have it in my mind, so I find it easy... [Because you feel...?]. self-confident (Xanh).

Because your questions make us more knowledgeable (Tiên).

Because I can get more knowledge (Huệ).

When participating in this project I will understand my studying... I learn about subjects, I learn how to talk... We learn not only at home but also at school (Lan).

I like you... you ask me some question... Because those questions are also the difficulties for us to overcome (Thinh).

Helps me be more intelligent (Long).

Because it helps us to learn better (Khanh & Trang).

You ask me "at school are our games good or not?" If they are not good and we can be hurt, I won't play those games. It stimulates my mind (Nga).

A number of children seemed to link their involvement in the project directly to ChildFund's role in the community, or community development work more generally (a point taken up again in Section 6.3.5). Only a small number of children seemed **reserved or didn't answer the question**.

When asked specifically if there was anything they **didn't like about being involved in the project most children simply responded 'No' or 'There is nothing'** despite interviewers providing considerable encouragement to children to be critical, as evidenced in the following exchange.

Q: No, you should be honest so that we can do our job better next time. Is there anything we should change so that the work will be done better next time with different interviewees? Do you think that we should change something?

Ti: No

Q: Really? You like all?

Both: Yes

One child indicated that they were a little nervous but when prompted further, said that they quite liked feeling nervous. One child also indicated that they didn't like that the interview had been held late⁴².

I am glad to meet you because you are very jovial. I like it because I have chance to take photo and when I grow up, I have a lot of nice memory in this school (Chuyên).

⁴² There had been a delay with the appointment for which the interviewer had apologised.

5.7.3 Perceptions of being asked their views

Children were also asked, more generally, whether they thought it was **important or necessary for adults to hear what children have to say**⁴³ about things like school and why this might be important. All children agreed that they thought it was important for their voices to be heard, although not all were able to explain why. Many children saw it as **a means for adults to better help them, particularly in relation to their learning**:

Because they can help (Linh).

Because of helping (us) to learn well (Trang).

Because it helps us study well and learn more new things (Sang & Ti).

Because adults will help us study many good things (Cá).

To share with children... and contribute ideas for children (Nga).

Because studying is very important to people's life (Len).

A small number saw it as important so that **adults can better understand and respect children**:

Because it helps adults know more about children (Hương).

I know that many people respect my ideas (Huy).

Some children offered more fundamental views about **children's agency and their responsibility and right to have a say**:

Because it is not good if the adults don't listen to opinion of children, just children listen to the adult. The adult should listen to the ideas of children (Xanh).

Because we can raise our voice. If we want someone to listen to ourselves but they don't, we will be dissatisfied (Tiên).

It is because we can give right answer and you listen (Duc).

Because parents do not know. When parents don't know, we have to tell them (Rùa & Tép).

A small number of children also responded in ways that reinforced **the existence of power imbalances** between adults and children:

Because when they ask, I need to answer honestly and accurately (Duc).

Because if they find out any wrong ideas while listening to us, they will correct and tell us (Thom).

A valuable insight into these cultural issues was provided by Chuyên and Khế in the following exchange:

In the text book of moral education, it is said that adults and children should listen to each other. It is also said that everyone should respect children. If children don't like to do something, adults cannot oblige them (Khế & Chuyên).

SUMMARY: Children perceived that it was important for adults to listen to children's views. They saw it as an important way for adults to know how they could best help children, but also so adults could better understand and show respect for children. Some children viewed it as a responsibility and right for them to have a say. One child pointed out that respect for children, and communication between adults and children, was an imperative emphasised in their textbook of moral education.

⁴³ Sometimes phrased as to 'hear your opinions'.

5.7.4 Issues of confidentiality

Children were asked whether there was anything they had talked about in the interviews that they didn't want other people like parents or teachers to hear, or whether there were any photos which they didn't want shown to anyone else⁴⁴.

The majority of children were happy for all their information and photos to be used as part of the research although sometimes the interviewers did need to seek clarification to ensure that the children had understood the question, as in the following exchange.

- Q: Are there any photos you have taken that you don't want me to share with others?
Cá: Yes.
Q: Which ones? Which ones don't you want me to share with others?
Cá: Uhm...here and here.
Q: Let me see. You don't want me to share with others. Why?
Cá: Because...they look really beautiful.
Q: Beautiful? Then why do you like to share with others?
Cá: I want to share with... our sponsors.
Q: Do you want them to see these pictures?
Cá: Yes.
Q: It means you like to share your photos with others, right?
Cá: Yes.

Only at School D did a small number of children indicate that they wanted some information kept secret. This may have been a result of the way the interviewer asked the children, which may have led them to believe that the information might not have been kept anonymous. Because of this potential confusion, four children were followed up to clarify their response and, as expected, they were happy for their data to be used anonymously.

- | |
|--|
| <p>Q: Do you like that adults listen to all of your ideas like the way I am talking to you now?
Lan: Yes, I do. Because if we have the talk like you and me are making, the talk will be very interesting.</p> |
|--|

⁴⁴ Interviewers needed to be careful not to imply that the information would be shared with specific teachers or parents or with their name attached. Sometimes this was implied in the transcribed and translated script (for example: 'Can we talk to your parents or teachers about the things we have discussed?'). The need for care with asking this question was discussed at the interim workshop.

Discussion



Having explored children's responses to the interview questions we now consider a number of broader themes and issues arising from the research. We arrange this discussion in three sections:

- findings related to children and childhood in rural Vietnam;
- findings related to teaching and learning in rural Vietnam;
- methodological considerations in conducting research with children in rural Vietnam.

6.1 Children and childhood in rural Vietnam

This section explores a number of recurring themes that emerged from the data in relation to children's lives and the experience of childhood⁴⁵ in rural Vietnam. We begin by discussing aspects of rural life as embedded within children's interview narratives. We then explore three key concerns expressed by children, namely: cleanliness and hygiene; the environment; and the behavior of their peers. Finally, the section considers a number of core features of the children's lived experience, namely morality, respect, obedience and self-responsibility.

6.1.1 Rural life for children

The lives of most of the children interviewed, and their experience of childhood, were highly influenced by their rural location. They were engaged in helping their parents in a wide range of agricultural activities from a relatively early age and accepted this as a normal part of their lives. Whilst the study didn't seek to document parents' occupations, the majority of children, when asked, indicated their parents were farmers⁴⁶.

While some of the tasks children engaged in might also be considered 'normal' for similar-aged rural children in minority-world countries (such as tending poultry or washing dishes) these Vietnamese children also undertook tasks which required considerable **skill and strength**. Their responsibilities often involved accompanying **risks** and children evidenced **tenacity and resilience** in performing these tasks. Examples of this include Trang's story of cutting banana trees with a 'big and long knife' to feed pigs; Nga's story of harvesting bamboo for flooring (*Interview Excerpt 1*); and Donald's stories of being responsible for grazing the buffalo (*Interview Excerpt 2*). Minh said that she didn't ask her parents for help when she had difficulty carrying wood, demonstrating her resilience by continuing to carry it. Similarly, Huy spoke of digging and clearing the drainage and ditches, stating confidently that 'It's not hard for me'.

SUMMARY: The out-of-school life of children in rural Vietnam was very much influenced by their role in domestic and agricultural activities. Children, both male and female, were evidently seen as highly capable, and they learnt and were allowed to performed many complex and sometimes risky tasks. Children's capacity to learn independently seemed to be well recognised by their parents. While only exploring children's perspectives, the data suggests the children's lives, and their experience of childhood beyond school, are highly influenced by notions of social agency and capability rather than dependency or vulnerability.

Descriptions of seemingly simple tasks such as cooking rice and washing dishes actually masked quite complex accompanying responsibilities, such as lighting fires or carrying water. For example, Rùa incidentally described drawing water from the well as she talked about how

⁴⁵ It is important to note here that interactions with our Vietnamese colleagues revealed that 'childhood' isn't a term or concept used or understood in Vietnam although it is widely understood by those working in NGO contexts. Consistent with Rydstrom (2003, see Section 2.3.1), the researchers explained that children were generally perceived in Vietnamese society as 'blank sheets of paper', 'incapable' in capacity for thinking, but not in practical matters.

⁴⁶ Exceptions included Nga's parents who sold Pho and Thinh's father who drove an excavator and whose mother was a teacher.

she cooked rice and Thom spoke of cooking rice, adding in passing that, ‘firstly, I learnt how to make a fire’.

The interviews provided interesting insights into children’s developing capacity to take on responsibilities as they talked about tasks they could not yet do. For example, Donald spoke of observing his parents weaving sedge mats, and Thúy spoke of still needing assistance from his grandmother to carry water up the ladder because ‘I’m afraid of losing my footing and falling’ (Thúy).

While proud of their ability to undertake such tasks, children also understood these activities to be **normal for children their age**. Certainly, the types of tasks being performed were consistently mentioned by all children. Indicative of this ‘taken-for-grantedness’ was the following response from Hue, when asked why she found it easy to graze buffalo:

Because it is common work for the rural people (Hue).

Children also pointed to **broader cultural influences**, reinforced through the curriculum, on their acceptance of their agricultural roles, as illustrated in Lan’s reminiscence about a ‘beautiful poem’ she had read in her Vietnamese textbook:

Q: Can you read [remember] it for me?
Lan: “Cày đồng đang buổi ban trưa, mồ hôi thánh thót như mưa ruộng cày”
Q: OK, what do you learn from that sentence in the poem?
Lan: I learn that the farmers have to do such hard work to produce rice.

It was particularly interesting that there were **no evident gender differentiations** in roles, either for parents or children. As described in Section 5.2.2 both parents seemed to be active in cooking and both boys and girls learnt to do a wide range of roles from domestic chores to heavy farm work.

Conspicuously absent in children’s discussion was mention of **technology or media**. Only Thinh and Xanh mentioned reading a newspaper⁴⁷ and watching television (in the latter case, they discussed learning about the rules of football from watching it on television). Little other mention was made of any electrical or technical equipment⁴⁸. It also seemed evident that play and games were associated more closely with school than home.

6.1.2 Cleanliness and hygiene

The emphasis on cleanliness and hygiene was a recurring theme throughout the children’s narratives, particularly at School A. Concerns primarily related to the condition of the school toilets⁴⁹, school yard and building walls (see Section 5.3.3 and 5.6.1).

The depth of concern for cleanliness was not surprising given the surrounds of many of the schools. In dry weather they were very dusty and in wet weather quickly became muddy. Furthermore, it was evident that children were given many roles and responsibilities for cleaning at school, performing tasks such as sweeping (outside and inside) and cleaning the blackboard on a roster basis, and sometimes also cleaning the toilet. Children also spoke of playing significant roles with cleaning tasks at home and Huy mentioned learning to wash vegetables:

We have to rinse each leaf of the vegetable cleanly... to be hygienic (Huy).

Many children spoke of their enjoyment in doing these activities. However, as indicated in Section 5.4.4, this cleaning could be used by some teachers as a form of discipline and some children found the work difficult:

SUMMARY: Children’s concerns about cleanliness and hygiene featured strongly in their conversations. The need to try to keep clean when living and learning in quite harsh and dirty conditions evidently affected children’s engagement in school. Facilities to wash were very limited in some schools and poor sanitation facilities were a significant concern influencing children’s wellbeing and happiness.

⁴⁷ The researchers clarified that this probably referred to what might be referred in Australia to a ‘School Magazine’.

⁴⁸ Only Hương spoke of using an electric rice cooker and described with some focus learning to plug in an appliance without being afraid.

⁴⁹ This is consistent with UNICEF data which indicates that 51.5% of Vietnam’s population has no access to clean water and 74.7% have no access to hygienic latrines (UNICEF, 2010).

The difficulty is that when sweeping, I must hold the broom tightly or the school play ground won't be clean... We must bend down, but we'll have backache (Thinh & Xanh).

It was touching that Vu indicated that she knew her teacher liked the school and children because 'my teacher helps us clean the toilet'.

The extent of the children's concern about cleanliness appeared to be deeply embedded in their consciousness. Thom, for instance, described a photograph⁵⁰ of her friends in the playground as, 'It's about our study and at the break, my friends don't play with dirt'. She went on to say 'I learn that we are not allowed to play with dirt during the recess... and we shouldn't make our clothes dirty'. As another example, Rùa spoke of enjoying the tasks they were given to do at recess time because 'I don't have to come to the yard. Because the yard is dirty'.

I must learn well so that I have a lot of knowledge to make my school and class cleaner (Chuyên).

6.1.3 Concern for the environment

Another recurring theme throughout most interviews was children's concern for the environment; mainly the immediate environment of their home, school and community, but also a broader concern about environmental issues in their country:

I don't like those who destroy the environment and chop down trees on the rocky mountain (Ti).

This concern was raised in a number of contexts. Many children had taken photographs which were about keeping the environment clean such as putting rubbish in the bin (for example, Donald; Sang; Cá; Chuyên). Environmental concerns were also voiced when children described what they liked or didn't like about their school (see Section 5.3.1 and 5.3.3.). In both cases, the presence of trees was often mentioned. This theme was again evident in relation to careers that children wished to pursue (see Section 5.6.3).

When asked **who had taught them** to keep the environment clean, Cá and Thúy replied, 'My teachers and my parents'. Ti indicated that they had learnt about protecting the environment in 'moral lessons'. Certainly, as mentioned in the previous section, a heavy influence was placed by teachers on keeping the school grounds clean and children also seemed to have had such concerns reinforced through their involvement in community activities (see Section 6.2.4), with Minh speaking of planting trees at Tet Holiday⁵¹. However, it is difficult to ascertain the extent to which the children's concerns might have been reflective of a broader, or particularly recent, public awareness campaign regarding the environment. It certainly seemed to dominate children's thinking, as seen in *Interview Excerpt 10*. That said, some practices which were promoted in the school wouldn't necessarily be considered environmentally sound in terms of contemporary western practices, as illustrated in the following quote:

It's about environment protection, burning rubbish (Lac)⁵².

Notably, children weren't just focused on their own learning but clearly evidenced **willingness to advocate for environmental issues** amongst their peers and broader community.

I want my class and the school yard clean. There is no garbage because when we throw garbage away disorderly, the environment will be polluted... We should remind everyone (Khế).

SUMMARY: Environmental issues featured as part of the children's education, and the data suggests they perceived these matters to be of significant importance. The children's agency was reflected in their frequently articulated commitment to pursuing positive environmental outcomes in their community and (through their future careers) in their country. The children clearly recognised that they could make an immediate impact on their local environment, particularly at school, through their own behaviours, as well as through advocating for environmental issues amongst their peers.

⁵⁰ Photograph CM10-1.

⁵¹ Conversations with the Vietnamese researchers also indicated that ChildFund had trained the Head of the Young Pioneers to run activities on environmental issues. They also reinforced that there was quite a focus on environmental issues in the school curriculum.

⁵² This quote was in relation to Photo CM9-14. Burning rubbish is a practice now considered unacceptable in Australia.

6.1.4 Concern about behaviour of peers

Related to the above discussion was another recurring theme, namely concern regarding the behaviour of their peers or others in the community (see Section 5.6.1). This was particularly marked at School A, although it did arise in other schools as well. There were many instances where children conveyed disapproval towards the behaviour of their peers. Sometimes their concerns related to environmental issues (as above), but other times the concerns were broader.

Ti, for instance, presented a number of photographs⁵³ of rubbish dropped on the ground by children, 'improper' graffiti on the school walls about teachers, and some 'damaged trees' which were accounted for by 'friends pluck trees'. Thom spoke of wanting more tables and chairs in the classroom which would 'mean that we will sit in pairs and no one will look at each other', indicating concerns over copying by peers. However, when quizzed about whether her school already had this type of furniture, she responded 'yes, we have' but that 'friends often draw on the tables and chairs and we have to replace them'.

As identified in Section 5.6.1, the condition of toilets was also, at times, attributed to misbehaviour of peers. Rather than identifying roles that adults might play in rebuilding or better managing sanitation facilities, children instead focused on what their peers might do (or stop doing) to improve things.

The extent of concern from children at School A was, perhaps, prompted by specific incidents at the school. As Ti described, there had been recent damage to school premises, although it was not clear whether this had been done by a child, young person or adult:

- Ti: I don't like that somebody breaks into the school and does some damage every Saturday
Q: Oh, really. How do they damage the school?
Ti: They climb up the tree to catch birds... They beat the bird nests and last year, they broke off the windows to come in.
Q: Oh, really? You still don't know who did it, right?
Ti: Not yet.
Ti: They even poke a branch at the lock. They are thieves... That happened the same to grade 3.

A number of children expressed concerns about **quarrelling or fighting** amongst themselves (Thin & Xanh; Em & Cúa; Cu; Tó; Nui), and Bubi stated that:

I wish that at my school, everybody will try to learn and not fight... and my friends do not have a foul mouth (Bubi).

However, only one pair (Ti and Sang) described incidents of **bullying**, inflicted by children in the secondary school:

- Ti: We don't have to share the gate with the secondary school.
Q: Ah, why don't you like to share the main gate with the secondary school?
Ti: Because primary students are often bullied by secondary students when they pass by their school.
Q: Ah, how do they bully you?
Both: They hit us.
Q: Really, have you ever hit by them, Ti and Sang?
Sang: Yes.
Ti: I was thrown with bricks to my legs.
Q: Oh, poor you. What did you do then?
Both: I told my teachers and the school guard
Q: What did your teacher do then?
Sang: She told the secondary school.

SUMMARY: Children were quite conscious of the impact of behaviour within the school environment, and readily identified and criticised the poor behaviour of their peers (more so than they were prepared to criticise any matter implicating adults). Again, the children's agency was very evident in the ways they saw themselves influencing the behaviour of peers, either through direct confrontation or through modelling more appropriate behaviour.

⁵³ See photos Ti-1; Ti-3; Ti-4.

While this was evidently a serious issue, the lack of mention of similar incidents by children at other schools would tend to suggest that bullying was not a readily identified concern. That said, this was not a specific focus of questioning and further research could explore this issue in more depth.

When interviewers asked follow-up questions related to what children did when they saw their peers engaging in inappropriate behaviour (such as littering or fighting), children indicated that they would make comment to their peers, although showed some hesitation as to whether peers would take notice:

- Q: If you see your friends quarrel with and fight each others, what will you do?
Em: I will stop them from fighting each other.
Q: Have you ever done that before?
Both: Yes.
Q: And did your friends listen to yours?
Em: Um...
Q: How do you stop them? What method do you often do to stop them?
Em: I often tell them not to fight each other.

6.1.5 Morality, respect and obedience

Consistent with Bankston and Hidalgo (2006) issues of morality, respect and obedience were embedded throughout the children's narratives and featured strongly in shaping their views and experience, both at home and at school.

Evidently, a strong emphasis was placed on **moral education at school**, and a number of children referred to lessons from their moral education textbook (see, for example, Khế and Chuyên's statement about why it is important for adults to listen to children, Section 5.7.3). Huy also spoke of a contest of telling stories about the 'good moral example of Uncle Ho'. When asked whether school was useful for her future career as a doctor, Khế replied that:

Learning moral education can help me have good morality and have good behaviour so that the patients respect me (Khế).

Similarly Hang and Linh spoke of the need to learn how to address teachers 'with respect, with polite attitude':

We have to learn how to behave respectfully (Hang).

Thinh and Xanh discussed a photograph⁵⁴ where their friends are 'gathering together to talk with each other' in a short break, with some children reading books. When asked about their learning from the photo, Thinh responded 'I want to tell that we should obey our parents, our sisters and brothers'. A number of children took photos of the 'Five teachings of Uncle Ho' hanging on their walls⁵⁵, identifying these as a focus for their learning.

Children also demonstrated **respect for their country and culture**, referring to and photographing the omnipresent pictures of Uncle Ho in the school and classroom. Ti referred to showing 'gratitude to revolutionary martyrs' through his work in the community. Bướm and Gày spoke of liking to salute the national flag because 'during this session we mention many good examples'. Huy spoke of wanting to be a policeman because 'I want to be someone who can protect my country' and also spoke of liking to learn Vietnamese because 'I learn folk-songs and proverbs in this subject', the example he provided (Anh em bon be mot nha) translating as 'We are brothers from four oceans but in the same family' (Huy).

Whilst questioning regarding whether children ever missed school to help their parents at home or on the family farm did not reveal any significant concerns (see Section 5.4.6), children none-the-less conveyed a strong sense of **obligation to help their family**. Children described many

SUMMARY: A deep respect for adults, particularly teachers and parents, was quite evident across all interviews. Children placed strong emphasis on morality and moral behaviour, both their own and their peers, but also recognised that such obligations extended to adults. Children's emphasis on the need to 'obey' institutionalised rules, and the 'taken-for-grantedness' of obeying teachers and parents was a significant influence on their experience. School played a very important role in transmitting and reinforcing dominant social norms and values, such as respect and obedience.

⁵⁴ Photograph CM5-3

⁵⁵ These hang in most classrooms in Vietnam and are as follows (translated): 1) Love the nation; love the people; 2) Study well and work/labor well; 3) Be a good colleague and be self-disciplined; 4) Practice good hygiene; 5) Be modest, honest and brave.

domestic and agricultural roles that they played to help their parents (see Section 5.2.1) and they seemed to genuinely enjoy doing these tasks, speaking warmly of the satisfaction they gained (see Section 5.4.2) and that they wanted to learn to help their parents even more.

I wish that I would help my parents do more work in the farm and earn more money to help them (Thom).

I feel glad and proud because I have done many things to help my parents (Thúy).

Such comments from children indicated a genuine sense of **concern for their parents' wellbeing**. For example, Canh indicated that he didn't want his parents to join in more school activities because 'I am afraid that my parent will be tired'. Canh also spoke of wanting to be a teacher so that he could help his parents via the salary. Len indicated that she liked music as a subject because she could 'sing when my parents feel sad'.

Notably, children also spoke of the **moral behaviour of adults**, particularly teachers. When talking about whether their teachers like school and teaching, children also made reference to their teachers' moral commitment and sense of responsibility (see Section 5.5.1). They emphasised how a teachers' role was to act respectfully to them, and expect them to act respectfully in return. Khế & Chuyên's astute comment that respectful communication between adults and children was something they were taught in their moral education text book (see Section 5.7.3), reinforces this.

A further theme which emerged was that of **obedience**. For example, when Think and Xanh were asked what they would suggest in order to help teachers work better they said 'We will be more obedient and obey them'. Such obedience, however, was not just presented as an emphasis on having to do what parents or teachers instructed, but was also related to rules, written instructions and directions. For example, in Interview Excerpt 9, Long indicated that visual resources to support science learning (for example, of the digestion system) would be something that he would 'obey'.

Children's deeply ingrained understandings of obedience and respect need to be acknowledged as a potentially significant influence on the **nature of their comments and disclosure** in the interviews, a point taken up again in Section 6.3.2.

6.1.6 Self-responsibility and self-sufficiency

Woven throughout the children's narratives was an emphasis on the importance of **self-responsibility**. When responding to a whole range of questions, children attributed responsibility for problems, or responsibility for solving or fixing issues, to themselves or their peers. For example, when describing having difficulties with their learning or study, it was very rare for children to attribute this difficulty to the teacher not explaining or teaching well. Rather, they were most likely to attribute their difficulties to not listening properly, not paying attention or not doing sufficient homework.

I don't learn multiplication table by heart... I need to study more (Linh).

It's because I don't listen to my teacher when she is lecturing (Hoa).

I do not pay attention to the teacher carefully (Hue).

At home I don't prepare the lessons much carefully (Của).

Another illustration is Linh's response to the question concerning whether there was anything about the textbooks that she would like to change, to which Linh responded, 'I want to amend some pages torn by me'. Similarly, when commenting on things that they would like to see improved at their school, children tended to identify issues that they needed to take responsibility for doing, such as putting garbage in the dustbin. Section 5.6.2 also highlighted that children perceived responsibility for the quality of teachers' practice as, at least partially, resting with their own behaviour.

SUMMARY: Children demonstrated a strong sense of autonomy and self-responsibility. They embraced and enjoyed the challenge to become self-sufficient but they also attributed issues and problems, as well as solutions to these, to their own actions and behaviours. These influences are a further indication of children's well-developed sense of agency.

The emphasis on self-responsibility also extended to the home. As has already been emphasised, children were provided with a high level of responsibility and seemed to quickly become **self-sufficient** at activities. A number of children made reference to their **parents going away**, such as on business or being home late (Len; Tép; Cá; Hương) and their ability to help or be self-sufficient at that time.

This self-sufficiency was less evident at school, where learning was directed heavily by teachers. That said, children approached their homework with a strong commitment and evident sense of self-responsibility. We take up this point in the following section.

Throughout the interviews, children conveyed that they were **happy and proud** about their capacity to be self-sufficient and responsible for performing tasks at home and at school. Such self-responsibility signals much about their sense of competence and **agency**, much of which has developed through their interactions with adults and the kind of activities they are expected to engage in from a quite young age.

6.2 Teaching and learning in rural Vietnam

In this section we discuss a range of issues related to teaching and learning. We begin by considering the socially constructed nature of ‘learning’ in Vietnam; particularly constructions of learning which fundamentally shaped and influenced the research. Following this, we focus specifically on children’s capacity for metacognitive insight before considering a number of specific issues related to teaching and learning in rural Vietnamese primary schools, namely:

- the content heavy curriculum and lack of integration;
- authenticity and relevance in learning; and
- cultures of support for learning.

6.2.1 Social constructions of ‘learning’ and ‘teaching’

In approaching this project, we were mindful that the language of ‘learning’ was bound by particular social and cultural norms. Our Vietnamese research colleagues highlighted that the term ‘learning’ (‘việc học’ as noun; ‘học’ as verb) implied learning that occurred at school. Talking about learning at home, they indicated, would be associated with sitting at a desk and studying (i.e. doing school work at home)⁵⁶. Hence ‘learning’ traditionally refers solely to academic forms of learning and might be likened to the English phrase ‘going to school’.

SUMMARY: The language of ‘learning’ and ‘teaching’ is invariably bound by particular social and cultural norms. In the traditional Vietnamese context, ‘learning’ is perceived in solely academic terms – what happens at school, and school work taken home (i.e. homework).

Despite much discussion around language, meaning and translation we were unable to locate an alternative term which was inclusive of the kind of ‘out-of-school’ learning which we were also interested in. The Vietnamese researchers suggested that we use phrases such as, ‘What activity do you do at home?’, ‘What work do you do at home?’ or ‘What do you do at home?’ and then follow this with questioning around ‘How did you learn to do that?’

Having become aware of this issue prior to data collection we recognised the critical importance of talking with the children about their understandings of learning. Hence, as explained in Section 5.1.1 (see also Appendix 5), a discussion was included in the Briefing Session with the threefold aim of:

- finding out how children currently understood the term ‘learning’;
- explaining that in the context of this study, we were interested in their learning in class, at home and in their hamlet; and
- helping them think through the types of things they might photograph given this broader interest.

⁵⁶ In actual fact, photographs taken by the children revealed that many children *didn’t* sit at a desk when doing ‘homework’ but some lay on their bed, sat on the floor or sat outside etc

‘Learning’ as discussed at the Briefing Sessions

Briefing Session discussions affirmed that children associated ‘learning’ with school. With some further prompting they indicated it could also happen at home, but associated this, firstly, with homework. After much prompting, children in all groups came to an understanding that there were other things they ‘learnt at home’. The sequence of children coming to this understanding, and the difficulties this entailed, is critical in understanding children’s constructions of ‘learning’, and has been detailed in *Interview Excerpts 13-16*.

Interview Excerpt 13 (from the Briefing Session at School A) demonstrates that it was not until the interviewer prompted at some length about things children had learnt from their parents that they began to speak of learning more broadly. Once this ‘invitation’ is opened up about other things the children have learnt⁵⁷, they enthusiastically list lots of domestic accomplishments. When asked, however, who taught them such things, their response is ‘no one’, indicating that they were largely unable to recognise the teaching and learning dynamic that happens out of school.

Interview Excerpt 14 from School B demonstrates a similar pattern of explanation and realisation, but here the children recognise that learning happens within the community. The community-based learning they focus on, however, is from more formalised activities.

The exchange at School D with Group a (*Interview Excerpt 15*) led children fairly quickly to a recognition that learning could happen anywhere. However, the children still didn’t start talking about learning outside of school as anything more than homework, until right at the end of the exchange, having been guided there by the interviewer.

Interview Excerpt 16 (School C), while quite long, is very significant in a number of respects. It demonstrates the emphasis children places on the teacher directing learning. Children insist that they cannot learn by themselves, despite their evident confidence in learning through observation and demonstrations at home (Section 5.2.3). After prompting, children realise they can learn from their siblings and then quickly talk about fundamental learning such as learning to speak and eat. However, rather than referring to early learning as a baby, the children elaborate by referring to learning rules and manners. Similarly, they begin to talk about learning to write, but quickly associate this with formal school subjects. The children also identify the need to learn skills for their future careers but insist that this is *not* what they learn at school. When the interviewer summarises children’s thoughts and again prompts them to think more broadly, they again raise issues related to respect and behaviour. Only after this degree of prompting do children speak more confidently of having learnt things such as singing, speaking and riding a bike.

Once it was established that the project was interested in broader concepts of learning, the children generally seemed to embrace this concept and remembered it when subsequently asked (for clarification and reinforcement) at the end of the Briefing Sessions, and again at the beginning of the interviews. Of course, having held this discussion in the Briefing Sessions, all subsequent comments and discussions about ‘learning’ in the interviews were influenced by exposure to this broader definition.

‘Learning’ and ‘teaching’ as discussed in the interviews

While analysing the interview transcripts we were particularly focused on the comments that children made in explaining matters concerning learning and teaching, and what these indicated about their own, and broader societal, constructions of ‘teaching’ and ‘learning’. This analysis was, of course, complicated by translation issues (as discussed in Section 6.3.4).

SUMMARY: Only through extensive discussion and prompting did children come to understand the broader definition of ‘learning’, as occurring in and out of school. However, parents and siblings weren’t perceived as ‘teachers’ or as engaging in the role of ‘teaching’. Children were better able to explain how they learnt out of school, perhaps due to the more authentic, naturalistic and diverse ways that children learnt here. The relative homogeneity and institutionalised forms of teaching occurring at school were ‘taken for granted’, just as the capacity of children to learn domestic and agricultural tasks at home was also ‘taken for granted’. The data revealed a disjuncture between the social and cultural constructions of ‘learning’ and ‘teaching’ and children’s understandings of their own agency and learning capability.

⁵⁷ Notably, in this discussion, the translated word used by the interviewer is ‘studying’.

At various times throughout interviews children alluded to explanations of what learning meant to them. For example, when Len was asked what learning from teachers meant, she responded:

It means you should raise your hand to speak and pay attention to teachers' lessons (Len).

Similarly, T^ố offered the explanation that:

Studying is praising our teachers and expressing our opinion (T^ố).

While generally children remembered and embraced the 'broader' definition of learning, there were times when they would return to narrower understandings. For example, when T^ố was asked to select some pictures taken at home related to his study, he responded 'I don't see any related to the study', despite having a number of photos which might have been discussed, including one on herding buffalo. The interviewer reminded T^ố about the Briefing Session discussion but he still did not acknowledge that any of the photos might relate to something he had learnt to do.

Describing the 'how' of their learning was, as predicted by the Vietnamese researchers, a difficult matter for many children. As mentioned in Section 5.2.3 children tended to refer to *what* they had learnt or a description of the steps required to perform the task. However it was interesting that, after prompting, the **children's descriptions of how they learnt at home were far richer than those of how they learnt at school**. As with learning at school, learning from parents included verbal explanations, together with help seeking and practice. However, when discussing learning at home, children were far more likely to describe learning through observation, drawing on words such as (translated) 'aped', 'mimicked', 'followed', or 'imitated'. They also mentioned demonstrations and verbal explanations from their parents, together with active experimentation themselves (referred to as 'doing a trial' by Duc). Children were also more inclined to emphasise their independence in learning:

Q: Observation and then imitation. Besides that way of learning, do you have other ways?

Thom: Apart from that way, I can teach myself ...

Q: You teach yourself?

Thom: Yes, I do... Sometimes my mother sees about it, sometimes I can do it myself

Such focus on independence in learning was not evident when children talked about learning at school. As indicated in Section 5.3.5, the main focus for how children learnt at school was through teachers' teaching, and this was mainly associated with lectures and instructions, together with the use of textbooks. 'Teaching' was heavily constructed as content delivery – with a subsequent requirement for learning to be focused on memorising or understanding what the teacher says. While occasionally a child would refer to examples, demonstrations or 'tips', these were far less commonly mentioned in reference to the school environment. Observation was almost completely absent from discussions of learning at school.

Many of the out-of-school activities that children had photographed, or spoke about in the interviews, were those used as examples at the Briefing Sessions (most commonly cooking rice, sweeping the floor, feeding chickens, grazing buffalo). While some activities discussed were a little less common (such as cutting timber, carrying water, holding siblings) many of the more fundamental learnings, or divergent activities that children *could* do *weren't* further discussed. For example, no children chose to discuss in more detail learning to talk, tell time or ride a bicycle. Even Khanh's photo of children playing chess was not talked about in any depth. In general, there was a degree of conformity in the types of activities that children focused on to illustrate their learning, and these were typically the things emphasised in the Briefing Sessions. This raised the question of whether children *had* understood the discussions at a deep or surface level.

While children were able to accept that learning could happen at home and at school, and they would recognise that their family members played a key role in supporting this learning, their parents and siblings weren't perceived as 'teachers' or as engaging in the role of 'teaching'. Yet, somewhat ironically, it seemed that children were much better able to explain the *processes* of teaching and learning in this out of school context. This was perhaps due to the more authentic, naturalistic and diverse ways that children learnt here. The relative homogeneity and institutionalised forms of teaching occurring at school were 'taken for granted' as what 'teaching' meant. Likewise, the capacity of children to learn domestic and agricultural achievements at home was also 'taken for granted' and, since it was so different to the learning processes occurring at school, there was a fundamental dissonance in constructing both as 'learning'.

Interview Excerpt 13: Children at School A discuss their understanding of 'learning'

- Q: Ok. According to you, what is studying? Where can this studying be taking place?
- A: In classes
- Q: It can be happened at school. How about Hoa? What do you want to share?
- Hoa: At school
- Q: Where else? Ok, Ti please!
- Ti: It happens at school
- Q: Ok, it happens at school. So what can we learn at school?
- A: We can learn some subjects...
- Q: ...How about the others? Do you have different idea? Where else can the studying be happening? ...Is there anybody with another answer?
- A: Can be at home
- Q: At home. It's correct. So what can we learn when we stay at home?
- A: Completing the homework or exercises at home before going to school.
- Q: Ah, doing your homework and exercise before you come to classes. It's correct. What more can we learn? Learn about what to make use to your life? For example, at home, there is something that you don't know what to do. Your mother can teach you this. It is also studying? Such as your parents taught you something at home?
- Hue: Learn how to cook rice
- Q: Ah, how to cook the rice. It's great. Hue has just had the very exactly answer that we can learn how to cook the rice. Can we do that thing by ourselves? Or we have to....
- A: I can fry the vegetables too
- Q: Ok, fry the vegetables. You can do lots of things such as cook the rice, fry the vegetables, boil the water....It's all correct
- A: I can wash the dishes
- Q: Ok, wash the dishes. So when you do those things, is there anyone to teach you how to do it?
- Ti: No, no one teach me
- Q: No? Ti said that there is no one. How about the others? Does anyone teach you?
- A: No
- Q: Oh, so you learn to do it by yourself?
- A: By aping my parents
- Q: Oh, by aping. This means that you look at how adults do it and you follow them. It's called aping. What do the others learn from your parents at home?...[children go on to discuss a range of tasks]

Interview Excerpt 14: Children at School B discuss their understanding of 'learning'

- Q: So, this project researches your studying. According to you, what is studying? Where does study take place?
- A: At school
- Q: Ah, at school. Besides it, anywhere else?
- Child: At home
- Q: At home how are you studying? What is an example of studying at home?
- A: Revise lessons before going to class
- Q: What do you study in class?
- Duc: Study subjects
- Q: And, you study in anywhere else?
- A: At hamlet
- Q: How is studying at hamlet?
- Child: Activities in summer
- Q: Ah, activities in summer
- Child: Sing and dance
- Q: Ah, learn to sing and dance, right? That's right. You learn to sing and dance at hamlet.

Interview Excerpt 15: Children at School D (Group a) discuss their understanding of 'learning'

- Q: What do you think learning is?
A: Learning helps us have knowledge.
Q: Good! Learning helps us have knowledge. Who has other idea? Khế, please!
Khế: I think we should learn so that when we grow up, we can build a better future.
Q: Right! ... So tell me where can we learn?
A: In school. In class.
Q: Right!
A: At home.
Q: Ah, at home. Anything else?
A: Everywhere.
[they go on to talk about school subjects]
Của: In school, we learn a lot of subject such as mathematic, reading.
Q: Ah, you learn that in school. But what can you learn at home?
Của: At home, I do homework before class.
Q: Good, you do homework before class. Anything else?
Của: My teachers give me exercises and I do them.
Q: Ah, your teachers give you homework. Who has other idea? Khế, please!
Khế: In school, I learn mathematics to know how to calculate, learn reading to read better. At home, I prepare lesson before class and review the lesson. If I have free time, I usually train my handwriting.
Q: Good. Thank you! When I come here, I hear you say that if you do not go to school, you stay at home on Saturday and Sunday, you do a lot of house works, such as: sweep your house, washing dishes, cooking rice. Do you have to learn to do these works?
A: Yes, we do.
Q: Right! Can anyone do these works without learning?
A: No.
Q: Good. We must learn to know how to do them. Is it called learning?
A: YES, IT IS.

Interview Excerpt 16: Children at School C discuss their understanding of 'learning'

- Q: Our purpose is to understand about your "study". So, what does "study" mean? ... For example, what it includes, where it happens... [no answer]
Q: If you do not know what it is, you can give me some examples. [no answer] Nhem, can you?
Nhem: It...it...is when we sit by the table to learn lessons.
Q: Oh, sit by the table at home to learn lessons. So what do you learn?
Nhem: Learn...some subjects like Math, Vietnamese. [some discussion around school subjects]
Q: Is there anything else related to "study"?
A: No.
Q: Uhm...so do you learn from this project?
A: No.
Q: Uhm... you can study by your own, can't you?
A: No, we can't.
Q: ...You've taken some examples of "Study" like doing homework, learning at school. Like Math, Vietnamese, Science, all of your subjects at school. But there're many things you have to learn to do. Who can give me some ideas?
Nhem: Teacher,...we need to learn from brothers, sisters and friends.
Q: Learn about what?
Nhem: ...learn how to say and how to eat.
Q: Well, learn from others. What do you mean "Learn how to say and how to eat"?
Nhem: We have to learn to say with respect... With polite attitude.
Q: ...Is there anything else?
A: We have to learn skills for job.
Q: Can you name some of them?
A: Shipbuilding.
Q: Well, every job. Are you learning skills for job at the moment?
A: No. Not yet.
Q: ...Before going to school, what did you learn? Nga, can you?
Nga: Teacher...we have to learn to write.
Q: Learn to write. Ok. Anything else, Viet?
Huy: Teacher,...we learn some minor subjects. [Discuss of drawing, PE, reading and English]

Q: Ok. I will summary your ideas. [Brief summary]... But, in our project, we extremely care for the broader definition. For instance, as Hang said, "Study" is learning how to behave well in life. Uhm...Is there anything else? Lan, can you?

Lan: We have to learn to say hello to teachers.

Q: Learn to say hello to teachers. Ok. Nhem, is there anything else?

Nhem: Teacher, we have to learn how to behave respectfully.

Q: I mean before entering grade 1...I mean when you're only 3 or 4 years old, what did you learn to do? What did you learn to do at age 3?

Lan: Teacher, we learnt to sing.

Nhem: Teacher, we learnt to speak.

Q: Learnt to speak. Before learning to sing, we have to learn to speak. Before learning to speak, what did we learn?

Q: While we were in primary school, what skills do we learn?

Child:Ride a bike.

Q: Oh, so you know how to ride a bike without learning? Or you have to learn to ride?

A: We have to learn.

Q: Have to learn, it's right. Uhm...Do you know how to watch the clock?

A: Yes.

Q: So, before watching the clock, what did you do?

A: Learn.

Q: That's right. When did you do before fastening your shirt with buttons? You can do it without learning, can't you?

A: No, we can't.

Q: So what did you do?

A: Learn.

[interview goes on to discuss a range of things they have learnt to do at home]

6.2.2 Children's capacity for metacognitive insight

'Metacognition' refers to knowledge concerning one's own cognitive processes, and the active monitoring and consequent regulation of these processes in the pursuit of goals or objectives (Flavell, 1976; Flavell, Miller, & Miller, 1993). It includes the capacity to reflect on one's knowledge and ability (what you know, how you learn and how you apply your knowledge) as well as one's ability to use appropriate learning strategies (Jones & Idol, 1990; Paris & Winograd, 1990).

In reading through the interviews we were particularly interested to focus on children's comments which indicated their own insights into *how* they learn, including any reflections on their learning capabilities or their awareness of their learning strategies and processes.

A close examination of children's descriptions of how they learn showed that **many had difficulty offering explanations of the learning processes or strategies they engaged in** when they learnt. Many times, children's discussion of how they learnt from teachers resulted in a circular logic resulting from self-evident reasoning (see also Section 6.3.2). In other words, explanations tended to be of the form 'the teacher teaches and we learn' or 'we learn because the teacher teaches' (our wording).

SUMMARY: While there were moments when individual children demonstrated capacity for metacognitive insight regarding learning strategies, this was not strongly demonstrated across the group more generally. Discussions with the Vietnamese researchers reinforced that metacognitive reflection was rarely something that was done in Vietnamese society or educational systems and hence explained children's difficulties in articulating 'how' they learn. Data did not reveal evidence of teachers providing children with strategies to aid memorisation or recall, despite the heavy emphasis of this in school-based learning.

Q: What is your method to learn it?

Cu: I must learn hard and calculate much.

Q: Oh I see. Are there any other methods?

Cu: The way is that we have to learn by heart multiplication and...

Q: How do your teachers instruct this subject? How do your teachers teach it to you?

Cu: The way is....

Q: Do you remember how your teachers teach Maths?

Bubi: Yes, I do. My teachers instruct it to all of us until everybody in my class understand the lesson.

As indicated in Section 6.2.1, this may have reflected the emphasis in schools on didactic instruction, however it also signalled that children were not adept or experienced at reflecting on the strategies they used to learn.

Similar limitations in children's awareness of how they had learnt things at home were revealed too. For example, in *Interview Excerpt 17* Khanh isn't able to remember or reason about who had taught him to use chop sticks, and only associated learning to write as something taught by the teacher⁵⁸.

That said, there were moments in interviews when children demonstrated sound metacognitive insight, particularly relating to their out-of-school learning. For example, a number of children spoke of the benefits of highly directive instruction, referring to being taught 'step by step', however in the following two quotes, children differentiated this form of teaching as valuable when something was particularly difficult, rather than being necessary for all learning:

When I am faced with something difficult, if I don't know what to do, I will ask my mother... and my father as well... I want them to explain to me about it clearly, then teach me to do it. If it's too difficult, they should teach me step by step (Huy).

When it is difficult to learn, I will ask my mother to train me step by step and teach me how to do it (Thom).

Similarly, children were astute in knowing that verbal explanations (discussed in Section 6.2.3) served a particular role in bridging a gap in knowledge:

Q: Great! You have done so many things. So...how do you learn to do those tasks?
Thúy: I learnt by myself.
Q: You learnt by yourself? Did your parents teach you?
Thúy: Uhm...I saw them doing and they told that I need to do by myself.
Q: Did they instruct you how to do?
Thúy: They only instructed some times and...then they haven't shown me anymore.

The following quote from Huy also illustrates this well:

I looked and saw her doing it and if there was anything missing, my mother would tell me (Huy).

Children were very aware of their ability to learn effectively, and often independently, through observation in the home environment and children's description of using repetition and practice to help themselves learn (see Section 5.3.5) also represented a form of metacognitive strategy knowledge. Another example included Nga's identification of the benefits of a summary notebook:

Nga: Because I study and then I forget, hi hi...
Q: Ah, first you study and then you forget. Do you have any method to help you study mathematics better?
Nga: I think that I should write all knowledge in a handbook, and when I need something, I open that handbook.

In Section 5.3.5 help seeking was also discussed and children were shown to place a value on the importance of hints, tips and suggestions, rather than provision of the answer. Some children also spoke of being assisted in their learning by their parents or teachers asking them questions (for example, Xanh). Thom spoke of an awareness that her brother and sister were more effective at helping her learn because 'the way to learn is much easier'. This indicates that Thom was aware of what sort of assistance she preferred, even if she couldn't describe it well.

Further, Em reflected on learning to cook rice from her mother, remembering her need to keep practicing over a period of time:

Q: In the first time you copied her action, did you do it successfully?
Em: No, I didn't.
Q: Well, so what did you do next to get it?
Em: It took me some days to practice.

Other examples of metacognitive awareness include Nga's awareness of the need for care and the potential for error when she rushes:

I should have done it right, but the teacher said that who did it fast, she would mark theirs. Thus I was in a hurry, I did it carelessly and it was wrong (Nga).

⁵⁸ The researchers did clarify that most children would start learning to write at home using chalk and pencils before going to school.

Further, Vu commented on his appreciation of a challenge and Huệ reflected on the benefits of mathematics in supporting his intellectual development:

I think there are many interesting puzzles that are helpful for my intelligence (Vu).

Maths can help us have a quick mind (Huệ).

Children also spoke of an **awareness of the influence of physical wellbeing on their learning**, mentioning the impact of being tired or stressed. Xanh and Thinh, said this happened ‘after a difficult mathematics lesson’ and they spoke of the benefits of play in breaks in order to relax.

Children did evidence a great deal of **confidence in their ability to learn**, particularly at home, and frequently made comment that no tasks were difficult for them. To some degree this confidence was also demonstrated in relation to their *preferred* subjects at school, with most showing a leaning to mathematics (as discussed in Section 5.3.2). However, while children may have been confident, they were not necessarily able to articulate well their strategies for success, or to extrapolate home learning strategies to the school environment. This is understandable given that the nature of the teaching and learning was so different and so didactic, and given that there were limited numbers of ways in which teachers taught⁵⁹.

Discussions with the Vietnamese researchers following the first field trip, however, led us to understand much more profoundly the issues for children describing ‘how we learn’. In talking through the difficulties the researchers had in engaging children around this, we established that **the concept of metacognition was quite ‘foreign’ to them as adults**. Despite several of our Vietnamese colleagues having been prepared through teacher education programs, and three of the four having undertaken postgraduate study at western universities, reflecting on *how* they learnt was identified as something that they had never been prompted or encouraged to do – even as adults. The Vietnamese Team Leader, who was knowledgeable of experiential learning approaches, indicated that she reflected on *what* she had learnt, but recognised that this was different to the reflection on *how* she learnt. The team agreed that **metacognitive reflection was rarely something that was done in Vietnamese society or educational systems**.

We also explored the notion of developing study skills (regarded as a common Western educational practice, although not quite the same thing as metacognitive teaching strategies). Again, the researchers indicated that none of their teachers throughout primary, secondary or tertiary study had embedded a focus on study skills or metacognitive strategies. One researcher indicated that she and her peers had shared suggestions while at university, but that this was self-prompted. They also reflected, from their perspectives as parents, that this was also not happening in their children’s education.

Despite the emphasis on memorisation in schools, there was little indication that teachers were providing students with cognitive strategies to support memory and recall, such as mnemonic techniques. That said, this study did not talk to teachers themselves about whether they do include any such strategies to support students’ learning. However, when considered in the light of discussions with the Vietnamese researchers it is clear that children were not exposed to opportunities to reflect on their learning, and hence it is understandable that they found it hard to respond to questions about ‘how’ they learn.

Present here was a fundamental cultural learning which challenged our initial assumptions and which significantly impacted on the study. We had assumed a certain understanding of, and capacity for, metacognitive engagement from both the children and, more critically, the Vietnamese researchers. In order for the Vietnamese interviewers to be able to ‘tease out’ ideas from the children, they needed to understand the metacognitive processes, too.

⁵⁹ Linh had been asked directly how many methods of learning her teacher used, to which she replied ‘Divide into groups and give lectures’ (Linh). The nature of group work was discussed in Section 5.3.5 and was shown to basically represent individual revision done in groups.

Interview Excerpt 17: Khanh reflects on learning to eat with chopsticks and to write

- Q: So, do you know how to use chopsticks?
Khanh: I know.
Q: Before using chopsticks, what do you use to eat?
Khanh: I used spoon.
Q: Who taught you to use chopsticks?
Khanh: No one taught me.
Q: Really?
Khanh: Yes
Q: Did your parents teach you use them? Can you try to remember if they ever taught you about that?
Khanh: I don't remember who taught me. I can learn to use them by myself.
Q: So, when you learn to write, do you remember who taught you how to hold the pen?
Khanh: Yes
Q: How do you learn to hold the pen? This is picture of you holding your pen. Can you tell me how do you learn?
Khanh: Teacher taught me how to write

6.2.3 The content-heavy curriculum and lack of integration

Much literature on schooling in Vietnam has emphasised the content-heavy nature of the curriculum and the subsequent emphasis for children on memorisation and rote learning (see Section 2.2.3). This study confirmed the dominance of teacher-directed strategies and children's need to remember and 'regurgitate'. This was illustrated in numerous comments from children, for example Mai's description of asking for help from her teacher:

She says I need to learn by heart in the next time before going to school (Mai).

Children's' difficulties in describing *how* they learn (metacognitive insight), and their tendency to describe how they performed a task, no doubt reflected the emphasis on *what* children learn, i.e. content over learning process. However, while children may have had difficulty describing learning process, they seemed to have an **impressive ability to describe curriculum content**. Although potentially influenced in translation, the following two quotes illustrate how these Vietnamese children were able to articulate the syllabus in a way it would be surprising for an Australian child to do⁶⁰:

I find it difficult to learn two figure division... Three figure number divides by two figure number [Why do you find difficult?] Because there are some numbers I can't make divide. I don't know how to do it (Duc & Canh).

Calculating the lateral surface area and total area of a rectangle. I should have done it right, but the teacher said that who did it fast, she would mark theirs. Thus I was in a hurry. I did it carelessly and it was wrong (Nga).

Because there are sub-subjects – telling a story, writing, sentences and words.... Because I can describe animals, people and landscape when writing an essay. And when learning sentences and words, I learn how to link sentence clause by conjunction. And I can learn how to tell a story which I read or learn (Nga).

SUMMARY: The content-heavy nature of the curriculum and the emphasis on teaching *content* rather than learning *process* no doubt contributes significantly to the learning experiences of children. The need for children to 'pass' a year before progressing, and the focus on exams means that teachers are under pressure to ensure content is covered comprehensively. Content would appear to be covered in discrete subjects with no indication of rich integrated tasks. There was little evidence of teaching strategies considered important in minority-world schools such as experiential learning (learning by doing), enquiry-based learning, or reflection.

⁶⁰ These quotes also provide an insight into the nature of the content being learnt by these 8-10 year olds, which would seem to be more advanced than the curriculum would require in Australia.

Children spoke of many separate subjects and all seemed to be perceived by them as distinct. There was little, if any, indication of integration of curriculum content. For example, moral education was a separate subject, not something integrated across the curriculum. There was no indication of the type of rich and authentic tasks ('rich tasks') which are seen to be a hallmark of quality teaching in Western countries.

Notably, however, children did not themselves comment on how much they had to learn, no doubt accepting it as the norm.

Another point worthy of comment was the requirement for children to 'pass' a year before progressing to the next. While this was not a focus of questioning it did arise in a few children's comments. For example, Nga talked of needing to learn content carefully because this was required in subsequent years, and Bubi and Cu indicated that they liked their class because all children learnt well:

The thing I like best is that everybody in my class learns well. Nobody fails. Everyone goes on to the next form (Bubi & Cu).

Because there are many exercises... We need to learn it carefully, because this knowledge is related to others in the next year (Nga).

Overall, there was very little indication provided of strategies for teaching and learning which might be considered important in minority-world schools, such as experiential learning (learning by doing), enquiry-based learning, or reflection. Discussion of the use of any visual or authentic resources was also minimal.

6.2.4 Authenticity and relevance in learning

Authentic teaching and learning is generally understood to be that which focuses on real-world, complex problems and their solutions. These approaches are multidisciplinary, in that they are not constructed in order to teach subjects such as geometry or philosophy, but rather are focused around 'real world' applications such as building a house, managing a farm, or selling goods at market.

It was an assumption of the Australian researchers that teaching and learning approaches employed in Vietnamese classrooms would not be very authentic due to the heavy curriculum (discussed above) and the emphasis on memorisation and rote learning. Such assumptions were in part reinforced by this study, but also in part dispelled.

As indicated in Section 5.3.5, there was **little evidence of the use of authentic resources in the classroom to teach subjects such as numeracy and literacy.**

Here we need to consider what was *not* mentioned by children, as much as what was. Children did not talk about cutting day-to-day objects such as fruit to learn fractions, nor did they talk about reading authentic texts such as labels or magazines. Nor were there indications of children being given writing tasks which were relevant to their daily lives, although Duc commented that his schooling was relevant to his future because:

We need to learn composition because when we grow up, we can write letters to ask after our grandparents (Duc).

Consistent with the literature (Section 2.2.3), and reinforced through conversations with our Vietnamese colleagues, **learning was primarily focused around the textbooks and if the textbook content wasn't relevant to the children's lives no or little adjustment tended to be made by the teacher** (see also Section 3.3.2 regarding the Bac Kan KAP survey). Examples of this from children were numerous. Nga, for example, talked about the difficulties she had telling a story as part of studying Vietnamese:

SUMMARY: Teaching and learning, at school, in Vietnam displayed limitation in terms of authenticity, particularly in the areas of literacy and numeracy. Composition, in particular, was an area where teaching practices were highly teacher directed and didn't account for the lived experiences of children. Content in the text books was also often irrelevant to the lives of rural children and was not adjusted by teachers, thus adding to the difficulties children experienced in some subjects.

- Nga: For example telling a story about a person who have great deserts to country.
 Q: Ah, have you known a person like that?
 Nga: No, I haven't.
 Q: Ah, well. What do you do when you have those difficulties?
 Nga: I tell my teacher that I don't know about that.
 Q: A Ah, so what does your teacher say?
 Nga: She says if I don't know, I should read in the Vietnamese text book of grade 5.

Creative writing/composition had also been identified by ChildFund staff as a problematic teaching area and this was reinforced through children's comments. Rather than writing 'creatively' children are typically told what to write in their compositions⁶¹. This is illustrated in *Interview Excerpt 18*, where Duc explains how his teacher taught him to write a composition about a mango tree. Notably, two children did describe a contrasting and positive composition experience where the teachers guided rather than directed the composition process, as illustrated in *Interview Excerpt 19*.

The study did, however, challenge our initial assumptions about the **degree to which Vietnamese schools taught practical skills**. The Australian researchers did not expect to find that children learnt skills such as sewing in the classroom:

When I know how to embroider, if I have ragged clothes, fixing it by sewing will be easier (Thom).

The example cited in *Interview Excerpt 20* about raising chickens is a further illustration of the unexpected practicalities of the textbook. Even more surprising, however, was the discovery that children primarily learnt many of their games from teachers – and even some domestic skills such as sweeping.

Such examples, however, were isolated. This is telling in relation to science, where only two children (interview partners Mickey and Donald) mentioned practical experiments using a battery to produce electricity and burning sugar (see Section 5.3.2). Had more children engaged in these types of lessons it is surprising that they wouldn't have been mentioned. Much more common in children's responses were indications of an emphasis on non-authentic learning processes; memorisation and exams.

Children, however, firmly indicated that **they perceived their schooling as relevant and useful for their future** (see Section 5.6.4). Len even directly stated that he believed the textbooks were relevant to his daily life:

The textbooks which are delivered by the school help us to know more about... our outside life (Len).

However, many of the explanations offered did not necessarily accord with western perspectives on authenticity and relevance.

When prompted to explain in more detail the relevance of their learning to their daily lives, many children struggled to respond, as indicated in *Interview Excerpt 2*. Further to this, concepts of what might be considered relevant and authentic to children were also very complex and nuanced, as is indicated in *Interview Excerpt 20*. Only two children presented a more consistent explanation focusing on the day-to-day application of learning to their lives:

I like to learn Math to sell buffalo (Canh).

Because in the future when I grow up, I will know how to calculate... [But what for?] Calculate when selling something (Mai).

⁶¹ These issues have also been discussed by Griffin and Phan Nguyet Anh (2005).

Interview Excerpt 18: Duc explains how he learns to write a composition

- Q: How does she explain to help understand more easily?
Duc: I need to make introductory part, body part and conclusion.
Q: Does she help you to find supporting ideas for each part?
Duc: Yes
Q: How does she help you to make introductory part?
Duc: Introductory part is there is a mango tree in front of my house.
Q: What do you do if your mango tree is behind not in front of your house? Do you write based on the reality?
Duc: ...[no answer]
Q: Where is your mango tree?
Canh: We don't have mango tree.
Q: No mango tree in your home? Do you have mango tree in your house?
Duc: No
Q: You don't? So, how do you write?
Duc: I make up.
Q: Really? You make up the mango tree. Do you see the mango tree?
Duc: Yes
Q: Where is it?
Duc: It is near my class.
Q: Uhm, so why don't you write there is a mango tree in front of my class?
Duc: I forget

Interview Excerpt 19: Thinh and Xanh describe a positive composition learning experience

- Thinh: I met [difficulty] when my teacher gave me an exercise to describe your relatives...I asked my teacher and my friends to understand more about the question... [My teacher] advised me that first I should choose one person, such as parents or brother or sister then I describe them... She reminded me of the body, form, face of the person I described.
Q: Did she suggest you by telling you what to do or giving you question?
Xanh: She also asked me some question... She gave me some question about the requirement of the exercise.
Q: ...Ah, she asked whom you chose and how your relatives were. And? Did you find it easy to answer the question how your relatives were?
Xanh: It was difficult for me.
Q: Why did you find it difficult?
Xanh: We must describe our relatives.
Thinh: We must answer that our parents have a white complexion.
Q: All right.
Thinh: My father has beard.
Q: Oh, so Thinh's father has beard. Does Xanh's father have beard?
Xanh: Yes, he does.
Q: Ah, he does. Thus, you understood the question how your relatives were, didn't you? You know that you must describe how their face is, they have white or dark complexion, your father has beard or not, don't you?
Thinh: Long hair. My mother has long hair, my father has short hair.
Xanh: I also describe that.
Q: Ah. Will you describe in another way if Xanh's mother has characteristic different from Thinh's mother?
Thinh: Yes, of course.

Interview Excerpt 20: Nga explains about the relevance of a Technology lesson to her life

- Q: Is there any lesson that have unfamiliar content you never know about it and you can't imagine anything when you learn that lesson?
- Nga: Yes
- Q: Which lesson?
- Nga: It is a Technology lesson.
- Q: Ah, a Technology lesson. What is it about?
- Nga: It is about raising chicken.
- Q: Ah, raising chicken. Have you ever raised chicken?
- Nga: Yes, I have
- Q: Can you put the knowledge you learnt into practice?
- Nga: No, I can't.
- Q: Why?
- Nga: Because my family use wooden trough, and in the text books, raising chicken needs using aluminium trough.
- Q: Ah, aluminium trough, therefore you can't put into practice with wooden trough?
- Nga: Yes.
- Q: Is it impractical?
- Nga: Yes.

Interview Excerpt 21: Hải tries to explain the relevance of maths to his life

- Q: Maths? So why do you like it?
- Hải: Because it provides me with Multiplication tables for my study.
- Q: So how do multiplication tables help you in your life?
- Hải: ... [no response]
- Q: Do they help you?
- Hải: They ...
- Q: Are they helpful in your life?
- Hải: ... [no response]
- Q: For example, you want to buy something. Do you need to calculate the price or quantity of what you buy?
- Hải: Yes.
- Q: Um. Does studying Maths help you do that?
- Hải: Yes.

6.2.5 Cultures of support for learning

The research provided many indications that the social constructions of 'teaching' and 'learning', and the educational practices of teachers, were not consistent with child-focused practice (as it might be perceived in the West). However, there was little doubt that there was a **strong culture of support for children's learning in this rural area of Vietnam**, from both parents and teachers as well as the broader community. This challenged stereotypes and assumptions about ethnic minority families' lack of interest or value placed on formal education, frequently referred to in Vietnam.

SUMMARY: There appeared to be a strong culture of support for children's learning in these rural communities. Children themselves shared this commitment and embraced the value of learning, recognising and appreciating the role of adults in supporting them.

This commitment and support was recognised by children themselves, as is illustrated by Len's comment in relation to one of her photos⁶²:

This is the picture of me studying. There are my mother and my father standing by me. I'm proud of this photo because my parents are always beside me; they take care of me and help me to finish my homework.

⁶² Photograph DS12-18.

Saito and Tsukui's research (2008) with teachers in Vietnam revealed that some participating teachers held negative views toward children⁶³. While this study did not talk with teachers, there was little evidence from the children of such negative relationships impacting on them in a significant way. In fact, children generally talked of warm, personal and supportive relationships with their teachers, although there were some exceptions.

The study revealed little evidence of children being kept away from school by parents to help with domestic or agricultural work (see Section 5.4.6). As such it is consistent with the literature indicating that participation rates in primary education in Vietnam are now quite high (see Section 2.2.2). That said, this study was not focused on the secondary school context where participation rates are known to drop⁶⁴.

Children themselves were also strongly supportive of, and committed to, their *own* learning. There were no indications in the data of any children resenting being at school or having to learn. In fact, many comments made by children emphasised their eagerness to learn, particularly out-of-school, including through self-directed means. This self-sufficiency was less evident at school, where learning was directed heavily by teachers. That said, children approached their homework with a strong commitment and evident sense of self-responsibility.

In Section 5.2.4 we explored children's comments about out-of-school activities and what they learnt from these. The hamlets within which these children lived were evidently very active in involving children in organised community activities. Teachers seemed to be actively involved in organising and running these community activities, which may have presented an issue where teachers did not live in the communities where they taught⁶⁵. Such activities seemed to bring a cohesiveness to the community and a sense of belonging to the lives of children and created a sense of a broader learning community.

6.3 Methodological considerations in conducting research with children in rural Vietnam

This study was particularly concerned to refine approaches to conducting research with children in rural Vietnam. In this section we particularly focus on:

- the photo-elicitation interview technique;
- issues in conducting interviews with children in Vietnam;
- interviewing techniques and research training;
- issues of re-presenting children's' voices; and
- the importance of an in-country partner.

SUMMARY: While there were issues with implementing the photo-elicitation method due to camera faults and some damage of equipment in the field the photographs provided a useful stimulus to 'break the ice' in the interviews and to inform subsequent discussion. The motivational value of the cameras was very evident since these were a highlight of involvement in the project for children. Interviewers needed to be prepared for photos not working and have alternative approaches to the interviews planned. A balance needed to be met between guiding discussion of the photos toward a constructive focus on learning, and making assumptions, based on adults' conceptions, on what might be significant in each image.

6.3.1 The photo-elicitation interview technique

The photo-elicitation interviewing technique had both advantages and disadvantages. Using the cameras and taking photos was one of the highlights of involvement in the project for many children (see Section 5.7.2). Although it wasn't specifically asked, it was unlikely that many of the children had held or used a camera before⁶⁶. The ability to spread the photos out and physically sort and move them around formed an **excellent icebreaker for the interviews**. We had been conscious that children may be tempted to take all their photographs at home and have none left to take at school the following day, however this only happened in the case of one child (Rùa).

⁶³ To the extent that the researchers needed to emphasise the importance of respecting the dignity of children, at some points even considering discontinuing their professional development meetings because of the risk of teachers strengthening their evaluative, authoritarian and negative views towards children (Saito & Tsukui, 2008).

⁶⁴ In fact, there was an indication from one child that an older sibling may be kept home from school to graze buffalo on some days.

⁶⁵ Further research might usefully investigate such broader roles of teachers in these communities.

⁶⁶ This was only asked of Huy, who responded 'no'.

However, the major drawback to the approach was the unreliability of the equipment and the camera purchasing issues which occurred when buying the initial equipment in Vietnam (as described in Section 4.2.7). In addition, damage to one camera by the child's peers and exposure of a number of films meant that some children did not have photographs upon which to base their interview.

There was a need to sensitively respond when children's photos hadn't work and to recognise the real possibility that they would be upset or disappointed. Continuing with the interview process, such that these children didn't feel disadvantaged, was critical. As a result of the project we also learnt that we needed to be explicit to children about allowing teachers or family members to use the cameras. Teachers in particular were curious about the cameras and may have felt left out where they weren't asked to be directly involved.

Another potential awkwardness with the photos was the tendency for both children and interviewers to focus on the most 'beautiful' photograph or the one that they 'liked best' rather than those with the most potential for stimulating discussion around learning. At times this meant that children chose a photo that they 'liked' and then seemed to struggle to elaborate on what it 'said' about their learning. Interviewers needed to be careful when asking children to choose a photo to discuss, and in retrospect it may have been wise to be explicit to the children about their chosen photo not necessarily being the 'best' photo.

While interviewers were understandably eager to encourage and praise the children about their photos we needed to be careful not to make value judgements about children's images, and to be particularly conscious of praising one child's photos more than the other's.

As described by other researchers utilising photo elicitation techniques (see Section 2.4.4), **children's explanations of what photos were about were, at times, a surprise to us as adults**⁶⁷. The complexity of descriptions of photos was compounded by the request for children to explain how selected images related to their learning, even when the photo may have been taken without particular consideration to this at the time. **Many children had difficulty explaining how the photo related to their learning or provided quite unexpected responses**, not always explaining something that they had learnt to do, even when the photos seemed to provide rich material for discussion. Examples of such issues include Lan's explanation of one of her photos⁶⁸:

From this photo I learnt that the dog helped me look after the house (Lan).

Notably, Lan didn't mention the timber structures in the photo, how they were built or used (which as adults we would have seen as a focus for discussion around learning).

Khanh had taken a photograph of two boys playing chess but mentioned it only in passing. As a further example, Thuy explained that one of her photos⁶⁹ was of a boy 'splashing water' and when asked what this meant in relation to her study, she replied 'To keep school clean and green'.

In refining the interview approaches for the second field trip we suggested that the interviewers be more proactive in steering the discussion toward photographs which provided good stimulus for discussion. This worked well in some (although not all) interviews. A good example of the interviewers guiding the conversation is provided in *Interview Excerpt 17*, based on Khanh's photo of his family having a meal⁷⁰. Another example stemmed from Sang's photo of a scene of agricultural fields and mountains⁷¹:

Q: Why did you take these two photos?
Sang: Because I see that the scenery is nice.
Q: So are these two photos relevant to your study?
Sang: I think yes
Q: Do you do anything in the field with your family?
Sang: Yes, I do. I go and take the straw
Q: Ah, take the straw. Very good! What else do you do?
Ti: I pull the weeds for paddy fields
Sang: And I pull the weeds for rice
Ti: I know to transplant the rice seedlings when I was in grade 3 or grade 4.

⁶⁷ Banks (cited in Epstein, et al., 2006) distinguishes between reading an image 'externally' (its form or what we see in the image) versus 'internally' (its content or what message it conveys).

⁶⁸ Photograph HT5-12.

⁶⁹ Photograph CL10-8.

⁷⁰ Photograph CL8-10.

⁷¹ Photograph CM2-2.

When conversations were guided in this way the photographs provided a rich stimulus for discussion. However, we were also very aware that what might be significant for us as adults in a photo might not be significant to the child, so a balance in the degree to which conversations were directed by adults and children was essential. The children's narrative and their own interpretation of their drawing or photo should be privileged over the adult's interpretation (Coates, 2004; Einarsdottir, 2007; Veale, 2005).

6.3.2 Issues in conducting interviews with Vietnamese children

The research led to a number of key learnings specifically related to conducting interviews with Vietnamese children. In this section we explore these issues, particularly:

- The strengths and limitations of interviewing in pairs;
- Issues of children understanding the questions;
- Complexities and contradictions in children's responses;
- Children's capacity for suggesting change;
- Cultural issues related to talking to children; and
- The benefits for children in being heard.

Interviewing in pairs

It might be remembered that children were provided with the option to be interviewed individually or in pairs, and all chose to be interviewed in pairs. This resulted in both strengths and weaknesses in the research design.

Having a partner meant that children seemed at ease in the interview context. Children's feedback on the process (reported in Section 5.7.1) indicated that all but one had preferred the paired experience over an individual interview. Notably, they were still in the pair when asked this, and so may not have felt able to comment if they had not enjoyed being interviewed with their partner.

There were, however, disadvantages in terms of the quality of the data. At times one child would speak more than their interview partner. Although the interviewers would attempt to balance this, some less forthcoming children would simply agree with statements made by their partner ('Yes, me too') or echo responses already made, at times very closely. Of course, it cannot be assumed that this *wasn't* a fair response by the child, who may have genuinely shared their interview partner's view (just as an adult might in similar circumstances).

It was also inevitable that the nature of the responses from children were influenced by their partner's comments. The extent of this influence did vary, however, between the children themselves. Children in some pairs were evidently more individually confident than others and would converse more with each other, adding to their partner's comments. Interestingly, however, at no time did children disagree or argue with a point made by their interview partner.

Since all children wanted to be interviewed with a partner, the pilot study was not able to ascertain whether children may have been more or less willing to talk in an individual context. However, it seems logical to suggest that, likewise, the nature of the individual interviews would have been shaped by the personalities and confidence of the individual children. It may have been that less confident children would have been even more uncomfortable in the individual context. The act of offering children the choice in itself, we believed, was an important one as it supported and demonstrated a commitment to recognising their agency.

The feasibility of conducting individual interviews within the time and financial constraints of the project would have been difficult. Doubling the number of interviews by talking to students individually would have meant a need for more researchers or a longer time in the field, both of which would have been beyond the constraints of the project budget. The paired interviews allowed for the study to gain perspectives from more children in an environment a little more reminiscent of a focus group (with its accompanying strengths and weaknesses) but without having too many children together in the one group and hence limiting the ability of individuals to find a voice.

SUMMARY: While the paired interviews did not yield independent data from each child, there were benefits of giving children a choice, and they seemed to feel comfortable talking in pairs. It would not have been feasible, within the constraints of the project, to interview as many children individually. There were, however, inevitable consequences for the quality of the data, with some children simply agreeing with, or echoing their interview partner's responses.

Issues of children understanding the questions

Much planning, consideration and discussion was focused on the development of the interview schedule, including doing a 'trial' of the questions with a small group of Australian students, as well as close examination of the questions with the Centre for Children and Young People's Youth Advisory Group, *Young People Big Voice* (see Section 4.2.5). While it had not been possible, within the constraints of this project, to form an Advisory Group of Vietnamese children as initially planned (see Section 4.1.2), the interviews at School A served as a 'pilot' and provided an opportunity to discuss and refine the approach before subsequent interviews.

Despite this, issues did arise where children seemed not to understand the questions being asked or the way that the question was asked by the interviewer led to misunderstandings. For example, in the following exchange the interviewer asks Ti and Sang whether they think their teacher likes the school. Not receiving a response, the interviewer prompts by suggesting that when children like school they are more likely to laugh and talk, leading to Ti misunderstanding:

- Q: Do you see that your teachers like your school?... For example, you like your school and when you are here, you laugh and you talk. Do you see that your teachers like that?
- Ti: No...my teacher doesn't like us to talk and laugh at class.

In two instances in the interview schedule we used a scenario to ask children questions. These included the idea that they had a magic wand so that they could change anything about their school (Section 5.6.1); and the idea that they imagine they were an adult with the job to help teachers teach better (Section 5.6.2). In both these cases, children found responding difficult, or respond in ambiguous ways, demonstrating they may have misunderstood what was being asked (see example in 5.6.2).

Complexities and contradictions in responses

Children's responses were at times quite **complex, nuanced and sometimes contradictory**, making it difficult but very interesting to analyse the data. Numerous examples might be provided. For example, in Section 5.5.1 we quoted Nui and Tô's **contradiction** of themselves in relation to whether they thought their teachers liked school. Cuc and Hoa also contradicted themselves in relation to whether they had time to complete their homework (Section 5.3.6).

The complexity of children's responses was at times compounded by misunderstanding of interview questions (as above) but in other instances were more a result of children's reasoning. *Interview Excerpt 10* provides such an example, with Nui and Tô bringing in an unexpected environmental theme to their response about whether their teachers' liked school, then indicating that their teachers were both happy and angry. Similarly, Tuan and Tép were cited commenting on whether their teachers were friendly. After a complex exchange the children state 'They are not friendly but they smile with us' (Tép). Another example can be seen in *Interview Excerpt 11*, where Ti and Sang talk about whether their teacher talks to them like they are adults. The children indicate that they like being treated like an adult and felt important, but when asked why it made them feel important Ti indicated 'Because I am her pupil'.

As has already been alluded to, a feature of many of children's responses was a **circular, self-evident reasoning**. As explored in Section 6.2.2, this could take the form of explanations such

SUMMARY: Significant care needs to be taken in designing interview questions, and in the slight variations in wording of these questions that inevitably occur in the interview context. While it would have been beneficial to discuss the formation of the interview schedule with a group of Vietnamese children it is unlikely that this would have completely eliminated the potential for misunderstanding and confusion.

SUMMARY: Children's responses were, at times, complex, nuanced and sometimes contradictory. While potentially a result of culturally challenging or difficult questions, at least some such examples seemed a result of children's reasoning and thinking. This reinforces the need for researchers to continue to probe and seek clarification from children around ambiguous responses.

as ‘the teacher teaches and we learn’ or ‘we learn because the teacher teaches’ (our wording). Further examples, drawing directly from children’s own words, include:

Holding their younger sibling was difficult because I found it difficult to hold him, but after some practice, I got accustomed to doing it (Tiên).

It might be supposed that such self-evident reasoning may simply have been a reflection of the children’s capacity and developmental readiness to express their ideas, or the degree to which they had previously reflected on ideas which were explored in the interviews. However, it is difficult to know how many of these contradictions and nuances might be a result of the nature of the questions themselves, which may have been culturally challenging for the children, or may have represented concepts difficult for the children to understand. These exchanges did, however, reinforce the need for researchers to continue to probe and seek clarification from children about their responses.

Children’s capacity for suggesting change

One of the challenges in interviewing children to ascertain their ideas for change was that they were evidently constrained in what they could or would suggest for school improvement, based on their experience and knowledge. As outlined in Section 5.6.1 children’s main suggestions for improving their school were around cleanliness and the condition of buildings and school yards. It is reasonable to suggest that they might have been aware that the latter (i.e. concreting and beautification of school grounds) was one of the activities that ChildFund supported.

However there was a **dearth of what might be considered to be more ‘creative’ suggestions.** Suggestions related to classroom resources might be considered a case in point. As outlined in Section 5.6.1 relatively few children made suggestions for improvement in school equipment and those who did were focused more on resources directly required to complete practical lessons such as handicrafts. In fact, few children talked about visual/physical resources such as wall charts, models, physical manipulatives (see Section 5.3.5) – most likely because they had not been exposed to many of these. Hence, when making suggestions about what could be improved, they were not able to draw on knowledge of the potential benefits of such resources. Even where the interviewer explicitly asked children about displays, responses were reserved and at times sceptical.

In my opinion, we should not decorate much as we will not pay attention to our lessons if we look at those pictures (Lac).

Interview Excerpt 9 provided an excellent example of children’s limited capacity for suggestions for change. Again, prompted by the interviewer, Vu and Long discuss whether they would like wall decorations in their classroom. Their initial responses were to hang rules such as ‘do not litter’ (Long) – the types of rules that might typically already be found on school walls. Only with prompting did the children then begin to consider puzzles, or illustrations of the digestive system.

Children also constrained their suggestions to **things that might be realistically provided within the social and economic constraints of their communities.** Notably, no children mentioned a desire for access to more sports or play equipment or technology such as music systems, videos or computers. Conspicuously absent was any reference to more books or library resources. Lack of exposure to media such as television (only mentioned by one pair of children) may have contributed to an unawareness of the potential for such resources to support their learning.

Whether aware of such resources or not, children generally seemed to more or less accept their learning environment, and just wanted it to be clean and safe (in terms of building and playground conditions). Beyond concreting the grounds and improving the toilets, suggestions for enhancing their comfort and wellbeing were also limited. Only one child mentioned a desire

SUMMARY: Children’s capacity for suggesting changes and improvements to support their learning were inevitably influenced by limitations in their knowledge and experience. Minimal exposure to media, or to communities and schools beyond their own hamlet, impacted on what they were able to suggest. The minimal mention of visual resources, manipulatives or other technologies needs to be interpreted in this context. Generally, children seemed to more or less accept their learning environment, just wanting it to be clean and safe.

for fans in their rooms – there was no mention of heating for the colder winter months⁷² or things such as playground seating⁷³.

Notably, the study did not seek data about children's experiences and exposure to ideas beyond their own immediate communities. Children were not explicitly asked whether they had access to television or radio in their homes or community or whether they had travelled to other areas, such as cities or larger regional centres⁷⁴. Feedback from ChildFund staff who worked in the communities, however, indicated that many would have access to televisions. The absence of suggestions in relation to such things as visual resources, manipulatives or other technologies to support learning, needs to be interpreted in the context of such limited experiences. Further research into children's exposure to ideas outside their communities would be interesting.

Cultural issues related to talking to children

As discussed in Section 6.2.4, Vietnamese children place a very high value on morality, respect and obedience. As such, it must be supposed that some of children's responses, particularly to questions asking them to make suggestions for improving their schools (5.6.1) or their teachers' practice (5.6.2), would be influenced by their lack of experience in, or willingness to, challenge the practices of adults. Other examples where this may have influenced responses include in relation to praise and encouragement (5.4.3), reprimand and discipline (5.4.4) and whether teachers like school and children (5.5.1). In fact, subtle examples were sensed across most aspects of children's discussions.

Truong Huyen Chi's (c2009) research with Vietnamese minority children documented instances of 'heteroglossia', where the voice of power prevails in children's discourse, underpinned by the power structures in the classroom and in children's daily lives⁷⁵. In this study, children were certainly very hesitant to question the authority of their teachers or parents and it is difficult to ascertain the extent to which this influenced responses. Sometimes it was what children *didn't* say, as much as what they *did* say that is of note. Certainly, paying attention to the points in interviews where children paused or did not respond was important.

SUMMARY: While there was some indication of perceived power imbalances, cultural assumptions about children's views not being heard or respected were somewhat challenged by the research. Children seemed genuine in their respect for adults. While children were reserved in making suggestions, assumptions about children not being given a voice in Vietnamese society were challenged by adults' willingness for children to be involved and children's comments about the importance of consulting with children.

A number of responses provided explicit examples of **the existence of power imbalances** between adults and children. For example, when children's perceptions of being asked their views on matters were sought (see Section 5.7.3), Duc and Thom responded:

When they ask, I need to answer honestly and accurately (Duc).

If they find out any wrong ideas while listening to us, they will correct and tell us (Thom).

Such quotes indicate that some children perceived talking to adults as a 'test', reinforcing the importance of interviewers continuing to state that there were no right or wrong answers.

That said, the research **did not reveal an extreme imbalance in power relationships** which impacted significantly on children's willingness to have a voice. Most children enthusiastically voiced their beliefs that adults should talk to children and, within their capacity and experience, did provide feedback and suggestions for improvement and change. Children's evident desire to be 'talked to as an adult' signalled that they sought the same respect afforded to adults. There was some evidence that they did (as a general rule) receive this respect and children's praise for their teachers mostly seemed genuine and not unduly influenced. There was also

⁷² Temperatures in this area would range, during school hours, from below 10 degrees in winter (but with a high chill factor) to above 37 degrees in summer. No classrooms have heating. In homes, the only source of heat would be the cooking fire.

⁷³ Many photographs depicted children sitting on the ground or on rocks in break time.

⁷⁴ The researchers, however, clarified that very few children would travel away from their commune or province and that, for many, their whole family would have lived in the area for generations with little movement from province to province.

⁷⁵ An example of this cited by Truong Huyen Chi' was where a girl, in a small group discussion, condoned teachers' behaviours in beating them "because we are too dumb; they couldn't teach us, they must punish us" (p.13).

evidence of rich and respectful relationships between children and their teachers. Children did not seem oppressed or unduly constrained in what they said or did.

This culture of respect also manifested in children **understating or under-emphasising issues**. For example, Long and Vu described the toilet as dirty because ‘there are many leaves falling off’ and ‘there are some cracks’ in the walls. Such comments cloaked the really significant issues related to the condition of toilets.

While requiring some prompting, the interviews weren’t lacking examples of **children offering criticisms or suggestions. They did so, however, in highly respectful way**. For example, there were evident tensions in at least one school between the children and their English teacher and children spoke of the contrast between his/her relationship with them and that of their homeroom teacher. In the interviews, children were forthright but respectful in highlighting these issues, although they also said they would not ‘complain’ at school (see Nga’s example provided in Section 5.4.4). It was also significant that there was strong support from parents and teachers for our conversations with children. None were denied permission to participate, indicating that adults were supportive of children’s views being heard. As such, the study tended to disconfirm some of the assumptions which the Australian researchers had previously drawn from the literature relating to cultural issues of hearing children’s voices in Vietnam.

The benefits for children in being heard

Interestingly, a significant number of children, when asked about whether they liked participating in the research, focused on the **positive learning outcomes for them** (see Section 5.7.2). Children commented that it made them more knowledgeable, more intelligent, that it helped them to learn and to understand their study. As Nga stated ‘It stimulates my mind’. As such, the children were indicating that the conversations prompted them to reflect upon their learning and that this, in and of itself, had metacognitive benefits, as outlined in Section 6.2.2.

SUMMARY: Children indicated that they had directly benefitted from the interviews and appreciated the opportunity to offer their views and be heard. They saw it as important and respectful for children and adults to listen to each other.

The research also must be seen as providing benefits for children in terms of their own self-esteem and sense of agency. As explored in Section 5.7.3, children saw it as important that adults sought their views on matters related to their lives, not only because it helped adults know how to help them, but also because it demonstrated respect. Hence, when children indicated that being interviewed made them feel like someone was interested in listening to them, they were likely indicating that they appreciated that their views and opinions were respected and seen to be important.

SUMMARY: Much was learnt from the research about conducting interviews with children in rural Vietnam and the project provided an invaluable capacity-building activity for Australian and Vietnamese researchers alike. Further development of strategies for encouraging children to talk or elaborate upon ambiguous responses may be needed. The ability to do so, however, is integrally tied with the interviewers sharing a common understanding of what *might* be of key relevance and interest to the project and such understandings are highly influenced by culture. Explicit discussion is required around the relationship established between interviewer and interviewee.

6.3.3 Interviewing techniques and research training

This project was approached as a research training and capacity building opportunity for both the Australian and Vietnamese researchers. As Australian researchers we knew we had a lot to learn about cultural issues in conducting research in Vietnam. The Vietnamese researchers also saw the project as an opportunity for research training. We all recognised that research with children in Vietnam was relatively rare and hence there was much that both the Australian and Vietnamese researchers needed to learn about cultural and methodological issues specific to research with children.

A key focus of initial preparation and training in Australia (see Section 4.2) was exploring ethical issues such as confidentiality, anonymity and voluntary participation and better understanding cultural understandings and implications of these notions for

the research. While there were some concerns about children's capacity to understand these, the transcripts revealed that the researchers did an excellent job explaining these matters and children generally seemed to understand (although see Section 5.7 regarding confidentiality).

Some issues did emerge with the **wording of questions in interviews** (as discussed in Section 6.3.2). Notably, it is easy to critique approaches in hindsight, when reading transcripts of interviews, since these make it easy to identify issues or missed opportunities for elaboration or clarification. However, there are benefits in unpacking some of the specific instances of what worked and what didn't, so that techniques can be improved in later projects.

For example, there was a tendency for interviewers to ask a large number of **closed questions** and to lead the children in their responses because of the phrasing of questions. The following exchange provides an example:

Q: So after we hear your opinion, do you feel that you are important?
Hue: Yes, I do.
Q: Tu, are you glad when you feel that you are important?
Tu: Yes, I'm
Q: Do you feel happy when your parents hear your opinion?
Both: Yes.

Again, it is easy to critique this in hindsight, however many times such closed questions were a result of **children seeming to be reticent to, or having difficulty in, responding to open questions**. This is well illustrated in *Interview Excerpt 20*. Such issues were, however, a 'catch 22' since children were more inclined not to respond or to respond very briefly to the closed questions, creating an impression that they were reticent to talk. At times the researchers planned to ask a closed question and follow up with further prompting, however often no elaboration was forthcoming or was very brief. These points are illustrated in *Interview Excerpts 1 and 2* where prompting aimed to help children respond to the 'how do you learn' question, but responses remained solely on *what* they had learnt (see Section 5.2.3).

Another aspect of interviewing that might be strengthened in future research is **the need for further probing, clarification and reinforcement of the meanings of children's responses**. As indicated in Section 6.3.2, children's responses often revealed complexities and contradictions. Where interviewers asked further questions, oftentimes the children's meanings were quite different to that which might be interpreted from their initial response. An example of this was provided in Section 5.4.5 regarding whether children experienced sight and hearing difficulties. Xanh replied yes, and it was only because the interviewer explicitly asked him if he had had his eyes tested that it was realised that the initial response masked a more complex truth.

There were instances where further prompting was not used in response to some (potentially) very interesting responses from children. Here it needs to be recognised that **what might have seemed of considerable interest to the Australian researchers may not have been so significant to the Vietnamese researchers**. This is particularly so in relation to matters which might be taken for granted as 'usual' in the Vietnamese context. It was also the case in relation to potential opportunities for probing students in relation to their learning approaches. However, because of the issues identified in Section 6.2.2, the Vietnamese researchers may not have identified these opportunities, or had the capacity to probe further, without a deeper understanding, themselves, of metacognition.

Another issue which warranted explicit discussion in the project planning and training was the **relationship that the interviewer established when interacting with the children**. While interviewers sought to be friendly and personable with the children, some elements of the discussions read (in translation) more as *teachers* speaking to students. In fact, some children referred to the interviewer as 'Teacher' (see Interview Excerpt 16), even though they had been encouraged to use the interviewer's name⁷⁶. On occasions, comments from the interviewer herself made the teacher role explicit, as indicated in the following well-intended introductory comment:

Don't be afraid. I am like your teacher. When talking with me, if you find any question difficult, you can ask me again or you can tell that this question is too difficult, I can't answer (Interviewer).

⁷⁶ Further exploration of this issue with the Vietnamese researchers indicated that the word 'Cô' can mean 'Miss/Mrs' or 'teacher', and hence the issue may have been one of translation.

Of course cultural issues relating to the dynamic between adult and child in Vietnam must be acknowledged as influencing the interviewing context and children's association of the interviewer with a teacher role was no doubt a reflection of their respect in addressing adults. However, it may have been beneficial (perhaps important) to explicitly challenge these perceptions early in the interview.

6.3.4 Issues of re-presenting children's voices

Analysing and writing-up data, in this report as well as in the children's publication, were complex from a number of perspectives.

Firstly, the issue of re-presenting children's views is, in itself, fraught with difficulties and issues of maintaining the integrity of children's views was of critical importance. As indicated in the introduction to the previous chapter we saw it as important to maintain a privileging of children's voices over our own, since the intent of this project was to capture and report as fully as possible their views and perspectives on learning and schooling. As such we maintained inclusion of extensive interview text, including both brief comments from the children, as well as longer narrative dialogue.

That said, any presentation of children's voices is inevitably shaped by the perspectives of adults. The extracts we chose to focus upon and cite inevitably represented our own perspectives on what we saw as important. Furthermore, there was a continual struggle to balance the representation of children's views where these were clearly articulated over those where brief or less articulate wording was used.

We were also conscious, in writing up the data, of our own conscious and semi-conscious constructions of children and childhood and how these influenced our re-presentation of data. For example, we acknowledged the tension between conceiving the children as 'student' versus as 'child', and consciously preferred to acknowledge them in the second broader capacity. This was important to us as we were interested in their perceptions of learning both in and out of school, and we wanted to acknowledge them as competent and capable learners in their own right, not just within the institutionalised and socially constructed identify as 'student'.

While the above matters are relevant to any research with children, a further complication in this research were the **barriers of language and the complications of analysis post-translation**. As Australian researchers conducting the data analysis, we were only in the position of engaging with children's voices through the words chosen by the translators. It was their choice of terms and phrases, rather than the children's direct language, which we were interacting with. This was particularly an issue when we became interested in the nuances of language around teaching and learning.

Within the scope of this project it had not been possible for the Australian researchers to meet with the transcribers and translators. While a briefing paper had been prepared for them (see Appendix 9) and the Vietnamese Project Leader did meet and talk to them, it was not clear how critical they saw it to capture the nuances in discussion which might have been important to the project (particularly around the meaning of 'learning')⁷⁷. With unlimited time or opportunity for conversation between the Vietnamese and Australian researchers, a greater emphasis would have been placed on re-visiting specific words and phrases in the original recordings to explore more deeply the nuances of children's meanings. The translators' skills were excellent and we (the Australian researchers) felt confident in the documents provided. However, in any further research, it would be beneficial to have translations done by someone who is integrally involved with the research and/or for there to be more time set aside for cross referencing of translations with original recordings with Vietnamese staff.

A further complication resulting from the language translation were decisions about the degree to which the transcribed quotes might be corrected or changed. While we (both Australian and

SUMMARY: Re-presenting children's perspectives in any research written up by adults is fraught with difficulties and this was further complicated in this study by the barriers of language and the complications of analysis post-translation. The 'adult' dialogue around meaning and language has, in itself, been a highly valuable aspect of the research. Within the scope of this study it was not possible for a thorough cross-checking of translated terms, however this should be acknowledge as an issue in future studies.

⁷⁷ We were not aware ourselves about the significance of this at the beginning of the study.

Vietnamese researchers) felt it was appropriate to correct minor editing/grammar issues, the larger challenge was the degree to which unusually phrasing (referred to as 'quirky' expression by one ChildFund partner) might be changed. Examples of this included the translation 'convenience', 'latrine' and 'W.C' in reference to toilet. Further phrases which were questioned when compiling the children's book included: 'contaminated' (probably meaning dirty); 'ragged' (probably meaning torn) and 'attractive' (which in context may have meant interesting). Other examples of phrasing which seemed unlikely to represent the wording of children, but which we were not in a position to re-interpret included the following:

They praise me as a docile child (Mai).

About my friends, they are meek and humorous (Lac).

As Australian researchers we struggled to determine the extent to which we should modify such expression and were hesitant to make such decisions without consultation with a member of the Vietnamese research team. We felt that without reference to a Vietnamese perspective, if not a return to the particular original interview data, it was inappropriate for us to second guess the child's meaning. As an example Chuyên was quoted as saying:

Technique can help me know how to sew and embroider and when I grow up I can sew for the poor children so that in winter, they can keep warm (Chuyên).

Two Australian reviewers, providing editorial feedback on the Children's book, suggested that 'technique' might be better rephrased as 'skill'. However, discussion with the Vietnamese Project Leader reinforced that 'Technique' was the translated term for the subject studied, and hence appropriate to leave as is. That said, there were some phrases in the Children's book which *were* adjusted from the initial translation, since these were felt to be more accurate in relation to children's probable meaning.

These issues are illustrative of the complexities of doing research in a country and context where the interviewee's native language is not that of the data analysers and report writers. These issues are particularly compounded when the research is interested in nuances of meaning and language choice. That said, one of the most valuable aspects of the research has been the cross-cultural learning provided through the coming together of different cultural backgrounds. As such, the 'adult' dialogue around meaning and language has, in itself, been a highly valuable aspect of the research.

6.3.5 The importance of an in-country partner

A critical success factor for research in countries such as Vietnam is the nature and strength of collaboration between the Australian and in-country partner. In this project, this relationship has been tremendously important.

The commitment of staff in Vietnam, and in particular the Project Leader, Ha Thi Tuyet Nhung, was vital to the project's success. Nhung's enthusiasm, professionalism, expertise and management capacity ensured the smooth running of activities in country. Her deep understanding of the issues of teaching and learning, and her capacity to engage in critical conversation around both western and Vietnamese educational practices provided an important opportunity for the Australian researchers to understand more about local and national educational issues.

The networks already established by ChildFund in country were also essential. This assisted in identifying, recruiting and appointing staff⁷⁸, particularly within the constraints of the short project timeframes. Communications with community leaders, education officials, teachers, children and families were made possible through the assistance of local ChildFund staff and we extend our

SUMMARY: As an initial project between ChildFund Australia and the Centre for Children and Young People an enormous amount has been learnt about working together. As a team of both Australian and Vietnamese researchers we have gained many insights into each others' cultures and have learnt *together* about the issues of conducting research with children and young people. ChildFund's role has been essential and the research would not have been possible without such strong commitment from both individuals and the organisation as a whole.

⁷⁸ The interviewers and translators/transcribers were appointed by ChildFund Vietnam under their own award conditions and expenses were refunded from the project account. This would have been much more difficult if employment was arranged through an Australian university.

particular gratitude to Doan Thi Linh. Furthermore, the willing participation of all stakeholders in the project was in large part due to the respect and trust of the community for ChildFund as an organisation.

The research served to reinforce, in subtle but notable ways, what a significant role ChildFund played in the lives of children in rural communities such as Na Ri. The photos taken by children spoke of the many forms of support that ChildFund provided. Ever-present were images of children in ChildFund jackets, carrying ChildFund bags and putting rubbish in ChildFund bins. Children such as Sang spoke of ChildFund tables in their classroom and Ti photographed a book provided by ChildFund for teachers because 'I wanted to take a photo about ChildFund' (Ti). Some of these photos may have been influenced by the children's awareness of ChildFund's role in the research, but in other instances it was clear that the photographs were not 'staged' for the project (for example the photos of crowds of children in the playground all wearing ChildFund jackets).

As with any research it is important to be aware of the potential influence of the funding body on the responses of participants. This is particularly so in this case where the researchers themselves were seen as being from ChildFund rather than from an Australian university (a concept quite outside the children's experience). There were a number of indications that children *did* link their involvement in the project directly to ChildFund's role in the community (or community development more generally), however it was only in the case of a small number of children where such influence was made explicitly.

I hope that Child Fund can make this life in future better (Chuyên).

I hope that this school can let all of the pupils go to school, even how poor they are. All people know reading and writing (Khé).

All children who were approached had been willing to participate in the project and there were both subtle and not-so-subtle indications that they may have felt some obligation to do so through a commitment to reciprocity, as indicated in Ti & Sang comment:

We study better and we are sponsored with many things when we take part in this project. We are happy to do tasks that you assign (Ti & Sang).

However, there was no indication that ChildFund's role unduly influenced children's responses or led to children's unwilling involvement. Rather, their role must be seen as an enabling one, with children feeling comfortable talking to interviewers from a familiar and trustworthy organisation.



Conclusions

This research, as a collaborative undertaking between ChildFund Australia and the Centre for Children and Young People, set out to investigate Vietnamese children's perspectives on learning and the provision of quality primary school education within the rural Na Ri district in Vietnam.

Previous sections have positioned the study in the context of the literature as well as ChildFund Australia's role, priorities and activities for their work in Vietnam. The design and conduct of the study was described and the data from children reported, followed by a discussion of this data from an adult's perspective.

In this concluding section we consider the findings from the project in relation to existing ChildFund priorities, so as to identify some specific implications for policy and practice as well as suggestions for future research.

7.1 Summary of key issues

Since 'learning', in the traditional Vietnamese context, is constructed as a formal activity that takes place predominantly in schools, the significance of informal learning that takes place at home and elsewhere is largely hidden from view and hence remains under-recognised and under-valued.

Children's agency is evident in their learning capabilities, independence and resourcefulness out of school. However, their more passive and dependent engagement at school has implications for their identity, learning self-efficacy and wellbeing. Gillies and Khan (2008) highlight that such issues are not uncommon in developing countries and teachers are typically *not* adept at engaging students in metacognitive processes. Students, they state, are often perceived as passive recipients of learning rather than active co-creators of knowledge.

By challenging children to think of how they may be able to find solutions, teachers have the potential to transform children's thinking (Gillies & Khan, 2008, 324).

There was little evidence in the findings of an emphasis in schools on *how* children learn. Enhancing the focus by children and adults alike on the *processes* of learning, and actively engaging children themselves in metacognitive reflection, can enhance their control over their learning and foster their sense of agency. Ensuring that learning experiences are authentic and relevant to the lived experiences of children is more likely to provide them with the capacity, innovation and independence to become agents of change in building positive futures for themselves and their communities.

The findings of the research have considerable implications for teachers, educational managers and policy makers. For Vietnam to successfully introduce child-focused curriculum and pedagogy it will be essential to consider the underlying socially and culturally constructed nature of 'teaching' and 'learning' and to challenge teachers and policy makers alike in relation to their assumptions about educational improvement. Constructions which institutionalise 'teaching' and 'learning' and position these as processes done 'to' children, rather than 'with' children will limit the success of educational reforms.

Many of the development activities currently being implemented for teachers appear to work directly at the level of introducing new teaching strategies, such as experiential learning. While such professional development work is essential and highly valuable, this needs to be accompanied by reflective processes that prompt teachers to think in different ways in order to have a major impact on practice. Just as this research has challenged children by asking the basic question of 'how do you learn?', so too must teachers be asked the fundamental question of 'how do you teach?' and even more importantly, 'how do you help children learn?'. For teachers to adopt child-focused pedagogies they need to understand, or be open to understanding, the factors that influence *how* children learn.

Developing a sophisticated level of metacognitive engagement in a classroom is not something that comes effortlessly to teachers in either developed or developing countries since it challenges deeply held personal and professional values, beliefs and assumptions not only about 'teaching' and 'learning' but 'children' and 'childhood' itself. It requires teachers to move from constructing children as 'incapable' and 'dependent' to 'capable' and 'independent' and recognising the capacity which they demonstrate in out-of-school contexts.

A change to child-focused pedagogy is also seated in the relationships that exist between children and adults. Again, for children's capacity to be most effectively realised, children need positive, respectful but also enabling relationships with adults; teachers and parents alike. This study has shown that the children in Na Ri have such a foundation in place. By building on this strong community commitment to their children's learning, and the enthusiasm and commitment of children themselves to learn, ChildFund Australia is well positioned to continue making a considerable difference to the lives of these Vietnamese children.

7.2 Implications for future ChildFund activities

Implications for ChildFund's practice might be considered as relating to the following five priority areas:

- Building the capacity of teachers and educational managers;
- Improving school buildings and infrastructure;
- Awareness raising for parents;
- Non-formal education activities; and
- Building the agency of children and young people.

7.2.1 Building the capacity of teachers and educational managers

Suggestions for Practice

- Consider the development, trialling and refinement of a teacher professional development program which explicitly discusses and challenges constructions of, and assumptions about, 'teaching' and 'learning' and the influence of these assumptions on teaching practice. Such professional development should be practical and relevant as well as reflective, providing tangible ideas that teachers can implement in their classrooms.
- Consider the development, trialling and refinement of a teacher professional development program (which may follow-on from that above) which introduces teachers to the concept of metacognition and provides tangible ideas for introducing metacognitive strategies to teaching practice. This might, for instance, begin with strategies to support memory and recall.
- Identify some areas of curriculum where rich, authentic and integrated learning activities might be developed without compromising curriculum coverage. These will need to be developed, trialled and refined in consultation with teachers. Ideally these would focus around themes which enhance children's agency and innovation in overcoming issues of disadvantage.
- Provide teachers with guidance (perhaps in the form of a booklet of ideas) as to how readily available resources might be used to enhance the authenticity and relevance of teaching practices.
- Seek opportunities to advocate for child-focused pedagogy (including a focus on teaching strategy and metacognition) with policy makers and MOET officials (at the national level) and school leaders and managers (at provincial and local levels).

Of course any such changes must necessarily take account of the living and working conditions of teachers and the need to work within existing systems. NGOs have an opportunity to organise extra-curricular interventions which can provide the opportunity to demonstrate such approaches which might not otherwise be observed.

7.2.2 Improving school buildings and infrastructure

Suggestions for Practice

- Continue current priorities in relation to school buildings and infrastructure, particularly concerning sanitation (toilets and water).
- Continue focus on planting trees in school grounds (being mindful to avoid deciduous species) and involve children directly in these activities.
- Provide access to educational resources which children might utilise independently in breaks or in small groups and which foster children's development of learning strategies e.g. 'game cards' which enhance memory/recall.

7.2.3 Awareness raising for parents

Suggestions for Practice

- Enhance parents' awareness of their critical role as 'teachers' in their children's lives and how children's learning self-efficacy can be enhanced through positive reinforcement.
- Involve parents in understanding processes for supporting their children's learning, including their homework, and the value of placing an emphasis on strategy knowledge.
- Help parents to see that the capacity of their children for learning at home can be harnessed to support learning at school, and the relevance of the two to each other.
- Help parents to advocate for more authentic learning for their children, and the value of integrating knowledge relevant to their domestic and agricultural roles into their learning at school.

7.2.4 Non-formal education activities

Suggestions for Practice

- Continue to build on the community-based activities that ChildFund currently organise in out of school and holiday periods and harness these to validate the learning that children do at home and acknowledge their learning capability. Such activities might represent authentic and fun activities that build on curriculum (e.g. literacy, numeracy, science) but foster independent learning. This could be an opportunity to implement the rich tasks suggested in 7.2.1 (above).
- Through such community-based workshops, children might develop fun but educational resources and games which support their learning (for use either in school or in breaks) and/or a play, book, posters (or similar) *for teachers* which acknowledge and validate aspects of 'how' they learn.
- Build on children's commitment to environmental advocacy through further activities which might involve them learning about, and finding a voice around, local priorities and practices.

7.2.5 Building the agency of children and young people

Suggestions for Practice

- Provide children with opportunities to see and experience different strategies for teaching and learning and the resources which might be used to support such processes so they are better able to advocate for their use.
- Invite children's groups (existing or to be formed) to be involved in talking about matters related to child-focused pedagogy, and facilitate their voices being heard by teachers and educational policy makers. Work with such groups to consider the role of strategy and process (over content) and the practical resources and teaching ideas that might embody child-focused pedagogy.
- Establishment and support of child and youth reference groups as a feature of ChildFund's work.

7.3 Suggestions for further research

As a result of this study, a number of possibilities are suggested for further research:

- **A larger scale study of children’s perspectives on learning and schooling** – This project might represent an extension of the pilot but with a broader sample size (wider age group and/or other locations). It could compare responses from children in city and country locations and might include children who have left school. Such a project would incorporate a youth advisory group and could extend to include a series of workshops with stakeholders to advocate around the issues and to communicate the views of children. Parallel studies could also be organised in other countries in the region in which ChildFund is working (e.g. Cambodia, Laos). *Ideally it would also be possible to replicate this study with Australian children to allow some cross-cultural perspectives and understandings.*
- **‘Child-centred’ education in Vietnam: Bringing children into focus** – This project might begin with an analysis of policy and practice related to child-centred education and would involve interviews with diverse stakeholders to better understand perspectives on child-centred education (policy makers, educational leaders, teachers, teacher educators, parents, community leaders and researchers within and outside Vietnam). It would also, of course, involve seeking children’s perspectives (hence overlap with the suggested study above), but with a specific focus on child-centred education. A key focus would be on improved understandings of all stakeholders’ perspectives on the transition to child-centred education and subsequent consequences for teacher professional development. It could also include an action-oriented phase, developing and trialling approaches to teacher professional development.
- **Building Vietnamese children’s agency through enhanced metacognitive awareness** – This would be similar to the above suggestion but with a particular focus on the role of metacognition in improving learning. Such a project would ideally have a strong action-research focus and would work with teachers to develop, trial and evaluate practices within Vietnamese classrooms.
- **Perspectives on children, childhood and children’s participation and ‘voice’** – This project would examine cultural issues that shape perceptions of children and childhood, drawing on the most recent developments in Childhood Studies and investigate the relevance and applicability of these ideas in Vietnam. It would include forums with children (informed by, for example, Bessell, 2009b; Bessell, et al., 2009) [see page 10 of this report] as well as diverse adult stakeholders including policy makers, educational leaders, teachers, teacher educators, parents, researchers and individuals from the community development sector.
- **Building capacity and sustainability in environmental/agricultural practices through a focus on authentic learning** – This project might be specifically targeted toward one of the environmental or agricultural grant schemes such as ACIAR. It would focus on the role of education in building children’s capability/agency in relation to sustainable and innovative environmental and agricultural practices. The approach would highlight and showcase child-focused and authentic learning approaches and investigate the outcomes of these in terms of how such learning can improve agricultural practices *and* foster innovative thinking amongst rural children. ChildFund is already working in these ways through programs run during long vacations with secondary students and out-of-school youth.



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Appendices

Appendix 1: Letter of support from the District Education Office

A signed version of this letter was provided to the Southern Cross University Human Research Committee.

Phòng Giáo dục- Đào tạo huyện Na rì
Tỉnh Bắc Kạn
Điện Thoại:
Fax:

THƯ BÀY TỎ HỖ TRỢ THỰC HIỆN DỰ ÁN

Chúng tôi viết thư này bày tỏ sự đồng ý cho tổ chức ChildFund kết hợp với Trường Đại học Tổng hợp Southern Cross tiến hành dự án nghiên cứu. Chúng tôi đã gặp gỡ với đoàn làm việc của tổ chức ChildFund và trường Đại học Tổng hợp Southern Cross và hiểu được mục đích và nội dung dự án. Qua thảo luận, chúng tôi nắm được dự án sẽ có sự tham gia của các giáo viên, học sinh và phụ huynh. Chúng tôi ủng hộ vì dự án sẽ đem lại những thông tin có ích cho các hoạt động với trẻ em sau này.

Chúng tôi cam kết hỗ trợ để thực hiện dự án

Na rì ngày.... Tháng.... Năm
Nông thị Giáp
Phó Phòng Giáo dục Đào tạo
Phó Ban Thường trực- Ban Quản lý

Nong Thi Giap
Deputy head
Na ri District Education Department
Bac Kan province- Vietnam
Telephone:
Fax:

LETTER OF SUPPORT

We write in support of the research project being conducted by Southern Cross University, in partnership with ChildFund. We have met with ChildFund and Southern Cross Staff and understand what the project involves. We are also aware of the processes being put in place to discuss the project with teachers, parents and children. We are confident that the research will not bring harm or undue risk to the children involved. It is also likely to provide good information for interventions in the future.

We give our support for the project to proceed.

Bac Kan date.....month.....year 2009

Nong Thi Giap (signed and sealed)

Appendix 2: Letter to ChildFund Project Officer, Bac Kan

Regarding project: Vietnamese children’s perspectives on learning and the provision of quality primary school education within the rural Na Ri district in Vietnam.

Dear Ling,

As part of a partnership between ChildFund Australia and the Centre for Children and Young People at Southern Cross University, Australia, we are conducting a research project in the Na Ri District. The aim of this project is three-fold in seeking to better understand:

Vietnamese children’s experiences of, and views on, learning and primary schooling in rural and remote communities (within the district of Na Ri, Bac Kan province);

how their views about learning and education might inform the development of future quality, basic education provided in a safe and stimulating environment; and

the ethical and methodological issues involved in undertaking culturally appropriate research in Vietnam that incorporates children’s views and voices.

This research will take place from November 2009 – March 2010. The communes we have selected to be involved are: Con Minh, Huu Thac, Cu Le, Duong Son.

The research will involve us talking to children aged 8-10 in 4 different schools as follows.

Name of School	Number of children (aged 8-10) we will interview	When the interviews will occur
School A	10	6-11 th November 2009
School B	10	6-11 th November 2009
School C	20	24-28 th January 2010
School D	20	24-28 th January 2010

The following will happen:

- Children will be selected randomly from class lists provided by the schools.
- We need to explain what the project involves to the children both verbally and in writing.
- If the children are interested in being involved then we need to send a note home to their parents explaining the project and asking if they would prefer their children not to participate.
- If the parents do not object then we will have a briefing session with the children to further explain the project. At this time we will give them a camera and instructions for taking photos.
- They will have the camera for 24 hours.
- We will collect the cameras the following day.
- We will then return and talk to the children in pairs about the photos and other aspects of learning and schooling.

We write to ask for your involvement in facilitating some of the early organisational aspects of the research as outlined in the table below. This explains what we would ask you to do now.

Tasks requested of Project Officer

Activity	How to do it	When to do it	Who involved	Preparation
Talk to Head teachers and classroom teachers (for Grades 3 – 5) about project	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Meeting to occur at the district office Talk through provided information sheet Discuss places and timing for briefing and interviewing (e.g. Sunday or weekdays) 	Now (10 th Nov)	PO Head teachers Classroom Teachers	Nhung to provide transcribed letter List of things to be prepared
Decide on when and where the briefing sessions occur	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consider separation from School but also needs to be close. Need parents to approve them going there 	Now	PO Head Teacher Nhung	
Selection of children	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Obtain class list Highlight or separate boys and girls Take every third or fourth child to obtain 10 children (number of boys and girls as in class) – Also need two children for reserve list 	Now	PO with Classroom Teacher	Obtain copy class lists
Talk to children	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Initial explanation and provide written letter Ask if they do want to be involve. If not, reserve children (on same day) Provide letter for children to take home to parents [if parents have literacy issues, can teacher read to them] 	School A and B – November School C and D – 2 nd week January	PO – Class Teacher needs to be aware so if parent has a concern that this is OK and they let us know.	Copies of information sheet for children (30) [extras to leave with school] Copies of letters for parents (30)
Teacher to remind children	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Classroom teacher to remind children the day before the researchers arrive Parents may need to be reminded to take children to briefing (if Sunday) If children have any concerns, they can speak to teacher who will pass message to PO 	Schools A and B – BEFORE 6 th – 9 th December Schools C and D – Last week January	Classroom teacher Teachers will also need to remember to let children out of class and let children take photos	
Distributing booklets to children	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> There will be provided by ChildFund Provide copy to all children in the classes 	April 2010	PO to deliver to Schools Teacher to distribute	CCYP needs to know number of children CCYP provide booklets
Talking to us about the results of the study	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Details will be provided next year. 	April 2010		

Appendix 3: Letter to children regarding the research

Dear student,

We are interested to talk with Vietnamese children about learning at home and school. We would like to invite you to take part in our study.

If you join in, we will:

- Meet with you as part of a group and tell you about the project;
- Give you a camera and show you how to use it;
- You will have one day to take photos at school and at home of things you have learnt to do;
- We will meet with you again and talk to you about your photos and about your learning at home and at school. You will be given copies of the photos. We might also ask you to draw a picture if you would like to;
- When we have learnt from talking to 50 children, we will create a picture book and give you a copy.

You do not have to take part if you do not want to – just tell your teacher and this will be OK.

If you do want to take part, and it is OK with your parents, we will first meet with you on XXX day at XXX time (i.e. after school). Your teacher will remind you when we are coming. If you have any questions or concerns about the project you should tell your teacher. Your teacher or parent can also contact:

Ms Ha Thi Tuyet Nhung from ChildFund in Vietnam – ph. XXXX

OR

Nong Thi Giap, Deputy Head, Na Ri District Education Department – ph. XXXX

Regards,

Dr Renata Phelps, Senior Research Fellow, Centre for Children and Young People
and

Ms Ha Thi Tuyet Nhung from ChildFund in Vietnam

Appendix 4: Letter to parents

Dear Parent,

We would like to invite you to allow your child to take part in a study to learn about Vietnamese children's views about learning and schooling. The research is a partnership between ChildFund and Southern Cross University in Australia. We want to learn how we can help to make school better for children in the future.

If you give your permission, and your child wants to take part, the following will happen:

- We will meet with your child as part of a small group after school to explain what is involved and to help the children feel comfortable. This will occur on XX date.
- We will give your child a camera and talk to them about how to use it. They can take it for 1 day and take photographs.
- We will then collect the cameras at school and develop the photos.
- We will then meet again with the children and talk about the photos and about learning at school and at home. This will occur on XX date.
- After we have learnt from talking to 50 children, a book will be produced and given to the children.
- We will also share what we have learnt with others who can help make schooling better in the future. The name of your child will not be identified.

If you do not want your child to participate that is OK and you can just tell the teacher. It will not influence the involvement of ChildFund in your community.

If you have any questions or concerns about the project you can talk to your child's teacher or you (or your teacher) can also contact:

Ms Ha Thi Tuyet Nhung from ChildFund in Vietnam – ph. XXXX

OR

Nong Thi Giap, Deputy Head, Na Ri District Education Department – ph. XXXX

Regards,

Dr Renata Phelps, Senior Research Fellow, Centre for Children and Young People
and

Ms Ha Thi Tuyet Nhung from ChildFund in Vietnam

Appendix 5: Briefing session notes

- Welcome
- Really interested to learn a little bit more about you.... Icebreaker – Draw their family – we do that too – Write on their name and how old they are
- Explaining the project and why we are doing it
 - Wanting to learn about how they learn
 - We are hoping you can help us learn how we can help children to learn better or enjoy learning more – hope to have more ideas to help you learn better
 - Project is being run by ChildFund and a University in Australia. We are both very interested in helping children
 - We are going to be talking to 50 children just like you (aged 8-10)
 - We are going to be collecting your ideas by using a tape recorder – because it is hard for us to write down or remember all your very important ideas that you tell us – This is what the tape recorder looks like. It would just be sitting on the table near us.
 - We can then write up the things you have said from the tape recording.
 - We will then put all the ideas together in materials.
 - We will put together a little book which we will give to you next year
 - We will then share the ideas from all the children with teachers, parents and people like ChildFund – all the people who can help make learning better for children like you.
 - Emphasise that this change won't happen immediately, so it might be that what we learn helps change things in the future – may not immediately lead to change for you but will help other children like you
 - When we share the information with other people no names will be written so no one will know which things you say to us so feel comfortable to tell us what you would like to say
 - No wrong or right ideas
 - This project is not compulsory like schooling – don't have to be involved if you don't want. So if by the end of our meeting today you don't want to continue that is fine. Just tell me or your teacher
- We are interested in learning. What does learning mean to you? What does it include? Where does learning happen? Could you give some examples? [RECORD THIS]
 - Explain that the project is interested in broader concepts of learning
 - we are interested in learning at home, at school, on way to schools
 - For examples learning maths and Vietnamese at School. How to cook, how to ride a bicycle, or feeding animals like chickens, using knife.
 - So we talk to you we will be talking about both home and school learning , things that you have learnt at home and school that you are proud of
- By the end of this meeting we are going to give you all a camera and you will have one day to take photos of things related to learning.
 - We are then going to come back and meet with you again on Monday afternoon and collect the camera to have photo developed
 - We will come back on Tuesday we come back to talk to you about the photos.
 - You can either meet on your own or in pairs. We will work this out by the end of the meeting and will also tell you the time we will meet with you at school.
- Here are the cameras... we are going to show you how to use them.....
 - Keeping camera still + showing what it is like if fingers in the way
 - [SPARE CAMERA - CHILDREN PRACTICE TAKING A COUPLE OF PHOTOS EACH]
 - You can ask your parents or brother or sister to take photos with you in them. You can show them how to use the camera too ** We would like lots of photos with you in them
 - You will get a copy of the photos afterwards, so it would be good if you are in some of the photos
 - SIT THE CAMERA ASIDE

- Explain that there are 36 photos they can take BUT it is important not to take them all at once (at the beginning). No more than 20 at home. Here are some suggestions of things we would like you to photograph.... [prompt them with ideas through conversation]
 - Their family (whether brothers and sisters, mother, father, grandparents),
 - Their house, where they sleep, what they eat, where they play, what they play
 - Their animals or farm
 - How they get to school (what they carry, are they with their friends, do they ride a bike etc)
 - Things they do in a typical day (e.g. when they get up, when they get home, household chores)
 - Something that you have learnt to do recently at home that you are proud of [If children need prompting suggest examples such as learning to ride a bike, learning to make a meal, learning to use a knife, learning to tell the time, learning to look after animals]
 - Your classroom, your school yard, your school friends
 - Something that you have learnt to do recently at school that you are proud of [e.g. photo of your bookwork, star flowers]
 - There might be other things as well that you think are important to photograph
- Ask what they think the most important photos might be.
- If your family don't want their photos taken it is important not to do that.
- Remember we said that we won't be using your name at all when we report what we learn. Would you like to decide on a pretend name (given name only) that we use instead? [write these down for each child]
- Do you have any questions [encourage to ask]
- Whether would like to meet us next by themselves or in pairs [WRITE THIS DOWN]
- Timetable for coming back – very specific – and where it will happen SEPARATE PLACE
- Who can remember what this project is about? Remind them it is about how they learn.

Appendix 6: Reminder list for children about photos

This was provided in Vietnamese to children following the briefing session]

REMEMBER:

- There are 36 photos – the camera will tell you how many you have taken
- Don't use them all at once!
- No more than 20 at home
- Show your parents, brothers or sisters how they can take photos of you
- If someone doesn't want their photo taken, don't take it. Respect their decision.
- Remember that the ones with * are important ones

SUGGESTIONS OF THINGS YOU CAN PHOTOGRAPH

- Your family - your brothers and sisters, mother, father, grandparents),
- Your house - where you sleep, what you eat, where you play, what you play
- Your animals or farm
- How you get to school - what you carry, are you with your friends, do you ride a bike etc
- Things you do in a typical day - e.g. when they get up, when they get home, household chores)
- * Something that you have learnt to do recently at *home* that you are proud of *
- Your classroom
- Your school yard
- Your school friends
- * Something that you have learnt to do recently at *school* that you are proud of *

There might be other things as well that you think are important to photograph. This is OK.
Photograph what is important for you.

Appendix 7: Individual interview questions

WELCOME – 5 mins

- Hello, lovely to see you.
- Remember that we said we need to record the interviews. Here is the tape recorder. Are you happy for us to put this on. If you want me to stop recording at any time just let me know.
- If you want to stop at any time because you get tired let me know.
- If don't understand any questions, or don't want to answer any questions, that is fine.
- If they would prefer to draw an answer, here are paper and pens.

Phase A -- 5 mins -- PURPOSE a) to helping child feel comfortable and willing to talk b) to collect some demographic information c) to help "us" better understand what life is like for them.

- Show children all photos– brief conversation about family, home, how get to school, things that they do at home etc (as above)
 - Use this as a lead in – e.g. "you must have had to learn a lot to be able to do xxx"]
 - Need to be able to identify photos from tape e.g. to vocalise what the photo is about. For example, Child says "This is something I am proud of"..... Interviewer says "I can see why you would be so proud of being able to ride a bike"...

Phase B – Focus on learning generally – 10 mins -- PURPOSE a) to help bridge understanding of 'learning' happening not just at school b) to help children to see that there are lots of things that they have learnt to do at home c) to provide a contrast between the way that children learn at home and how they learn at school.

- Ask child to choose one or two of the photos which shows something they are proud of that they have learnt to do at home. [PUT OTHER PHOTOS ASIDE]
 - When was this? Where was this? Why did you learn this? How did you learn this? Who helped you? How did they help you?
 - Ask them questions to "tease out" HOW they learnt this [e.g. did you listen, watch, read, talk, memorise, do it/try it out]
 - How did you feel when you learnt to do this? For example, did it make you happy? Excited? Confident to learn other things?
- Can you tell me something else you have found easy to learn? How did you learn [e.g. did you listen, watch, read, talk, memorise, do]
- Can you tell me something you have found hard to learn? What happened when you found this hard to learn? What made it hard to learn? What would have made it easier to learn? Who would you ask for support?
- Are there any out of school groups or activities you are involved in that help you to learn? E.g. youth clubs

Phase C – Focus on Schooling [teaching strategies/pedagogy, learning motivation] –15 mins

- Ask child to choose one of the photos which shows something they are proud of that they have learnt to do at school e.g. photo of their school book.
 - Is this your favourite subject at school? What is it about this subject that you like?
 - Is there a subject at school that you don't like? What don't you like about it?
 - What helps you to learn most at school
 - e.g. when you listen, watch, read, talk, memorise, do
 - When the teacher is friendly or helps you individually
 - When it is something that is very useful for you e.g. to use at home
 - How does it make you feel when you do well at school? For example, does it make you happy? Excited? Confident to learn other things?
- Have there been things that you have found hard to learn at school? What made it hard to learn? What happens when you have difficulty learning things at school? What would make it easier to learn? Who would you ask for support?
- What do you like best about school? [if child has trouble thinking of things, The things that you learn? friends? Teachers?]. Why?
- What don't you like about school? Why?
- Do you have work that you take home from school to do at home? Does anyone help you at home? How do they help? Is it hard to find time to do homework? What makes it hard to do homework? [If difficult to answer, ask if teachers give enough guidance, if homework is like schoolwork, so they understand it enough to do it]
- Do you like your classroom and school? Why Is there anything about the school buildings or the classrooms would you like to see changed or fixed? (e.g. toilets, desks, more posters on walls)

Phase D – Focus on social, emotional and physical wellbeing issues – 10 mins

- Do you have difficulty hearing or seeing things in the classroom?
- Do you have days when you don't go to school? Why? Does your teacher understand why you miss school?
- Do your parents get involved in any aspects of school? Do you like it when they are involved?
- Do you feel happy/good/confident at school? Why/Why not? What are the things that help make kids feel happy at school?
- Do you think your teachers like school? Why? Why not? How can you tell? (e.g. do they smile a lot? Do they laugh or seem happy? Do they like children?)
- Do your teachers ever talk to you like they would talk to other adults? For example, do they talk to you about things other than your school work? Do they make you feel important/ special as a person – like you have important things to say?
- Do you think it would be good to be a school teacher? Why? Why not?

Phase E - Future of Schooling / Learning 10 min

- If you had a magic wand (could make a wish) and could change something about school to make it better for children, what would you change?
- If you were a grown up and given the job of helping teachers become better teachers, what would you suggest/do/say?
- What would you like to be or do when you are grown up? How important is learning to help you in the future? What might schools do to help you more?

Phase F - Agency, Voice – 5 mins

- What did you like about being involved in our project? [e.g. did they like using camera? Did they like being asked whether we met with them together or by themselves]
- How does it make you feel that we wanted to ask you about your views?
- Do you think it is important for adults to hear what children have to say about things like School?
- Is there anything you didn't like about being involved in our discussion today?
- Is there anything we have talked about today that you wouldn't like parents or teachers to hear?
- Are there any photos which you don't want shared or shown to anyone else? [take these away and destroy]

Thank children very much for participating

Tell them that what they have told us is very important and valuable

Emphasise that this change won't happen immediately, so it might be that what we learn helps change things in the future – may not immediately lead to change for you but will help other children like you

Remind them that next year (around May) we will be providing them with a booklet reporting on what we found out

Appendix 8: Preparation of researcher in Vietnam

Regarding project: Vietnamese children's perspectives on learning and the provision of quality primary school education within the rural Na Ri district in Vietnam.

- We greatly appreciate your involvement in the project.
- Renata looks forward to meeting with you when she visits Hanoi in January.
- The first visit to Na Ri will involve you assisting with the research process, observing the briefing groups and interviews. You may then have a go at conducting one interview with either Nhung or Quynh Anh present and then you may be asked to conduct an interview by yourself.
- We hope that you will learn a lot from involvement in the research.
- We would also very much enjoy learning from you and receiving your feedback on the research process. We value the diverse backgrounds of everyone involved in the project.
- The research is being conducted from a deep respect for children and a desire to learn about and from them. We see it as very important to hear their views and provide an opportunity for them to express what they think about things that are important to them. We believe that children have important things to say that we can learn from.
- In this research we need to put our own expectations to the side and let children tell their own story.
- The relationships that we build with the children are important – we need to create an environment where they are very comfortable to tell us things.
- We also need to be very respectful of what they tell us.
- We also need to acknowledge that children are often in situations of vulnerability – there are issues of power and authority that affect them and we don't want to put children in any situation where they feel threatened or uncomfortable.
- A key part of the research is learning about the cultural aspects of conducting research like this in Vietnam.
- Also it important to learn about what works and what doesn't in the way that we are conducting the research.
- A key part of their role is to observe the research process and reflect on and take notes about what works and what doesn't so that we can refine the process for the next time around.
- Talk through the briefing session notes and the interview questions.
- Explain that these are a guide – we want to ask all the questions, but it may be necessary to vary the questions a little in the interviews to respond to the children.
- Explain the importance of talking through and “unpacking” the photos of learning.
- Also important for us to be aware of any issues related to stakeholders – any concerns or issues they may have.
- They need to be shown how to use digital recorders.

During the briefing meetings can they:

- Take notes of anything important that happens.
- Take notes about what the children say in response to the question “What does learning mean to them”.
- When the children have drawn their picture, label these with code Aa, Ab etc...

During the interviews, can they:

- Observe the interview techniques.
- Non-verbally encourage the children to talk and feel comfortable.
- Note down any questions that the children have trouble answering.
- Be a back-up to make sure the tape recorder is on and working.

Appendix 9: Information for translators and transcribers

Regarding project: Vietnamese children's perspectives on learning and the provision of quality primary school education within the rural Na Ri district in Vietnam.

- It is important for us to hear what the children say – not your interpretation of what the children say.
- We want to maintain the way that children say things – not change the expression so it sounds more like an adult speaking.
- Transcribe exactly what is heard. Not change any words.
- We want to capture if a child hesitates or is unsure. If they don't have an answer that is important for us to know. Please don't leave out questions that they didn't answer.
- Confidentiality is important. It is important you don't tell anyone about the things that children say – particularly which children say particular things.
- Each child has been allocated a unique identifier Aa, Ab, etc The Transcripts should be labelled with this code to identify which children say which things.
- We will provide a list of the questions that we ask the children – there may be some variation from the questions or changes in order. But we want to be able to record the questions asked and the children's responses.
- Where there are two children interviewed together we need to be able to identify which child is speaking (wherever possible). Please try to indicate this with Aa Ab etc. If you prefer to use first names then we will change this to Aa, Ab etc.
- Some things can be left out of interviews where they are not about the research. For example, at the beginning there will be a conversation to settle the children down, make them comfortable. We do not need this translated. If there are any interruptions then just write "interruption for 5 minutes".
- Please record the timing of the interview every 5-10 minutes approximately i.e. to "mark" the place in the recording where the voice file is from.
- In translating, if there are any words or sentences that you are unsure of, please highlight these so the researchers can check them.
- Sound recordings will be provided in MP3 format (either voice recorder is provided also OR the software can be provided and just the audio files. They may already have relevant transcribing software).
- Please type up the transcripts in Word format - Please e-mail the transcripts to nhungh@childfund.org.vn
- We will "spot check" for accuracy.

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