

Child Rights Education in Vietnam

TA THUY HANH

Ten-year-old Dat is busy drawing a picture on the playground of his school. It is the review day of the month's theme on child rights. Dat and his friends chose to draw one of the rights of the child. Dat draws a family in a park. It is his dream of a good life that seldom comes true.

"The best thing I know is being with my parents," he says. "But they never have time to be with me, except during Tet."

Children have the right to a good life, Dat learned during the week. They have the right to play and to be with their families. They should not be discriminated against because of their gender. And they should not be beaten.

"My parents beat me when they think I've said or done something bad," says another boy. "And in school you can be punished in different ways. You might be hit or forced to stand turned to the wall or on your knees for half an hour."

Next to Dat, Hien draws children playing on a school yard. "I like my school, that's why I draw it," she says. "I have learned that children have the right to go to school and to use their own language."

For the second year Dat's and Hien's school organizes education activities on the theme of child rights. One of those working on the activities is fifth grade teacher Le Thuy Quynh. She was worried about the theme weeks:

"I was nervous that the class would become unruly and that I would lose my authority. But I, and the children as well, like more this form of education. They learn to be more responsible and they have become more active in other subjects as well."

This year the students are more open and active than last year, says the school's principle Nguyen Van Binh. "I am very happy for this change in attitude. This year the children understand better what it's all about and they're

particularly interested in the fifth subject, the one about children's right to have opinions. They express themselves more freely and they dare to bring up child rights at home."

Apart from the teaching inside the classroom, the students during the theme education had quizzes, games, singing and drawing. During the review day, they all sang in unison a song about their country as one big family.

Some of the students wrote a play. It's about a family where the parents give everything the son asks for. He does not help at home while his sister cooks and takes care of the house. Finally the daughter loses her temper and cries out to her parents: "You spoil him. I have the same rights as him. That I have learned in school!"

This is not always the situation in the schools of Vietnam. Education is still more often built on one-way communication, with very traditional and hierarchical relations between teachers and students. Much of this is a consequence of the strong Confucian values which not only affect the situation in schools, but also the relations within the family, between young and old, and in the society as a whole.

History

Children are highly valued in Vietnam and the wish for children to grow up safe and healthy is genuine and universal. Education is accepted as an avenue for a better future. Parents and communities are well aware of what children

need to thrive: shelter, a caring environment, health, good nutrition and psycho-social stimulation. However, the critical importance of play in promoting children's cognitive, emotional and social development is not generally recognized.¹

Confucian values, which are the backbone of the Vietnamese society, inform the conceptualization of children and their families. Gender defines the roles of parents – father as an active subject/agent in the public sphere and the mother in the domestic sphere, which are then transferred to children. Discipline and obedience, common concepts in Vietnamese society, are considered important both by adults and children. The expectations of both society and family toward the child are based on these values, which are critical components in the education of a child and the overall education system. The social and cultural environment strongly affects the child to adapt to the prevailing concepts and to be socialized into the system. The concepts are internalized, they become a part of the child's consciousness. The children themselves express the importance of obedience without little questioning and the Confucian structure is reproduced.

Vietnam is, however, the first Asian state and second in the world to ratify the Convention of the Rights of the Child (CRC) in 1990. The implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child in Vietnam is now required by law. The law entitled "Protection and Care and Education of the Child" was ratified by the National Assembly on 12 August 1991. The Vietnamese government on 14 November 1991 issued an implementation decree.

During early 1990s, Save the Children in Vietnam placed high attention to raising awareness on the CRC. It was translated into local language, published and distributed through different channels. Awareness-raising workshops on CRC were organized for different stakeholders such as police, educationists, journalists, parents, community members etc. Quizzes/contests were organized for children.

After a number of awareness raising activities were held, there was a felt need to take one step further to promote the interpretation and internalization of CRC in Vietnam. Training manuals were developed and training workshops were organized. One important aspect is that the rights holders should know and be able to claim their rights. In October 1996, Save the Children Sweden (SCS) approached Vietnam's Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) to discuss potential collaboration concerning child rights training in primary school. The response was positive. By the end of the 1996-1997 school year, education activities on child rights were launched in four districts of Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC). The 'Week of Child Rights', was an arrangement similar to what SCS had experienced in other countries, e.g. Sweden and Peru. During the 1997-1998 school year, rights education activities were implemented in 32 districts in 8 provinces/cities of Vietnam.

The immediate objective of the experimental project was to gain experience on how to carry out training on CRC for primary school children. The long-term goal was to have child rights respected by teachers, parents, adults and by children. To reach the goal, the project has transformed into "Month of Education on Child Rights" and worked through schools to reach the primary school children and their teachers, but also through mass media in order to reach the society, adults, in general. In short, in 1997 the Office of the Government approved 'Week of Child Rights and Obligations,' which later on changed to the 'Month of Education on Child Rights and Obligations.' The subject is taught for five weeks, one lesson and one theme a week. The themes are:

- I am a child, a valuable person with rights and values
- My Family – where I am loved and cared for
- Country and community – my huge family – my right to protection

- School – where I learn and play – My rights to education
- My opinion is also important

Activities

A training package was developed based on the materials used in SCS's CRC education in schools project in Latin America. The original training package included a guidebook for class teachers with ideas for activities to be carried out in the classroom and a number of posters highlighting children's values and rights to be displayed in schools and classrooms. Training of key staff was often organized during summer holidays. In October, a launching ceremony was organized to which provincial officials and all principals from other schools of the district were invited. During the month, schools also produce drawings, pictures, performances, and arrange contests to strengthen classroom activities.

Evaluation on the impact of CRC Education in Schools

An evaluation was conducted in late 2000 to assess the outcome of the project.

It was commonly recognized that the project brought about remarkable changes in knowledge, attitudes and behavior of stakeholders namely the education officials, students, teachers, and parents.

Students are in general happy, excited and proud in learning this subject. Students in schools covered by the program are not only aware and know their rights, they have actually changed attitudes and behavior. The fact that they are proud to learn that they have rights proves that the subject is relevant to primary-school-age students. The teaching methods provoke students' learning of the subject. After the education activities there are obvious positive changes in their attitudes. They are more compassionate and treat each other more equally. They have more self-esteem and are more mature, more self-confident and less timid in all school activities.

At Phan Chu Trinh primary school in Ho Chi Minh City, fourth grade students participated in child rights training. For five weeks they enjoyed drawing, writing, role-plays and different kinds of quizzes. The teacher asked the students about the different problems facing children in daily life and the students discussed this in small groups. The teacher then summed up the discussions.

In teaching the subject, teachers felt they had better relations with students and in general also felt more responsible for them. Teachers in schools that are covered by the program enthusiastically received the subject. They find the contents practical and suitable for primary school. They can practice the new methods, the students are interested, and they can run an effective lesson. They say that, after teaching the rights and obligations of the child, they appreciate their profession more, as they easily can see the result of their work in the changes in students' attitudes and behavior, which are more difficult to see in other subjects. They also see a positive change in their own attitudes. They care more for the students and have greater respect for their opinions.

Another important and widely accepted effect of the program is its impact on teaching method. The handbook applies a methodology, which is in accordance with the objective of MOET to apply methods with learner focus, with children as actors. Thus the program is helping to reinforce this existing objective. To many teachers the program has become a practical example needed to trigger off a change in methodology, not only in the subject itself, but also in other subjects. Thus, it is a very fortunate coincidence that the program has worked as a leverage for the introduction of the new teaching methods in other subjects.

We get instruction from the Ministry that we should reform teaching methodology, that we should use child centred methodology but we do not know what does it means. Thanks to child rights activities we know what it

means and how to go about it. The Month of Education on children's rights blow in a new wind. I felt ten years younger when I conduct child rights education for my pupils. (50 year old teacher, Dong Thap province)

Education officials realize the importance of the subject. They realize that there is a difference between theoretical knowledge and practical implementation. They feel that the reasons are twofold: students' values and way of thinking, and the lack of knowledge of the society at large. The Vice-Minister of Education, saw this education as vital for the future. Vietnam's modernization and industrialization process will need self-confident, active people. If students learn their rights, it will benefit society because they will then be aware of their duties.

Child rights month enrich school activities. It helps the school to get out of the outdated school practices and have more lively environment.

The 2003 Month of Education on children's rights and obligations was organized in 17 provinces across the country.

A general trend in parents' attitudes is that they all want the rights and obligations of the child to be taught, as they want their children to be better aware of their rights and consequently to fulfill their obligations. Another reason given is that teachers who are aware of the rights and obligations treat their students better. Parents say they respect the children's opinion more and try to control themselves better than they used to in order not to violate the rights of the child.

Had I learnt about child rights before, I would not have made my daughter's life miserable. I forced her to follow my ideas when time came for her to choose which subject she should choose to study. She selected Literature but I wanted her to take Math. And she failed. (A parent)

Having known CRC I realized that I violated my children's rights a lot. When I brought up my first two children I often im-

pose my opinions on them. Our relationship was so tense, and we were all unhappy. With my third child, I listen to him, respect his ideas and do not force him to follow my instruction, so our relationship is much better and he was successful in life. (A parent)

Child Rights Training in Teachers Training Colleges

After the first years of carrying out Month of Education on children's rights and obligation, basic awareness about child rights had been generated and it was suggested that the subject be introduced in all primary schools throughout Vietnam.

In order to ensure the quality of child rights training in primary schools, it is essential that class teachers have basic understanding of child rights. To implement CRC Months in school, the Ministry of Education organized a number of short in-service CRC training courses for key teachers who in turn provide CRC training for their colleagues. While this strategy might be seen as appropriate solution for immediate needs, it is not considered as a long-term strategy taking into consideration the vast population of primary school teachers.

Against this backdrop, and in order to make child rights education activities more effective, a project to promote basic understanding of teachers about child rights and to build their skills for organizing child-rights-related activities was started in 2000 with the collaboration of SCS and the Department of Teachers (DoT) in the MOET. Initially, child rights trainings were introduced in 17 teacher training colleges (TTCs).

Immense possibilities were seen for integrating child rights in the teacher training curriculum. Child rights are not respected in schools due to limited awareness among teachers about the concept and the participatory methods. At the inception stage, child rights training in TTCs serves two objectives: (i) it enhances the understanding and respect for child rights among lecturers and students so that they can

actively contribute to teaching child rights in accordance with the CRC and Vietnamese law; and (ii) it contributes towards introducing new methods of teaching and improving the quality of education at TTCs and schools.

The project on child rights trainings in TTCs comprised of the following:

- Training of TTC lecturers responsible for teaching moral education, nature and society and pioneer and youth activities to students preparing to become primary school teachers. In these trainings, the lecturers were provided with basic conceptual knowledge and training skills for informing their students about child rights and educational activities that they could in turn undertake in primary schools.
- Development of a training manual incorporating the Convention on the Rights of the Child and child rights education in schools that could be used in the TTCs.
- Organization of child rights trainings for TTC students who are preparing to become primary school teachers.

The teacher trainers try to find different way to make the activities as effective as possible. Training sessions are followed by other social activities as drama, quiz, essay writing contest and debate forum, etc.

At Hanoi Teachers Training College, discussion and debate are important parts of the child rights training. One of the topics is discrimination. On one occasion the students were introduced to the concept by their facilitators. They were divided into groups to discuss their opinions.

It became clear that teachers in general, prefer helping good students instead of children with disabilities or special needs. By practicing argumentation for all children's right to equal help from the teacher, the students' view of children changed. The students had earlier seen the child as an object but the training influenced their perspective to see that all children have equal value and rights.

Students also learned about the history, the principles and the groups of rights under the CRC. They discussed on how to integrate child rights training in future teaching in relevant subjects such as moral education, social-natural sciences and pioneer councils activities. At the end of the period, forums were organized whereby teachers and students debated on different issues of the rights of the child, relating to daily life and their future profession.

The MOET staff produced a child rights training manual to be used in TCTs.

Mid term assessment held in late 2003 shows that there is general consensus among the MOET and TTC management and training staff that child rights trainings are very important for Vietnam and must be provided extensively. The teaching staff responsible for child rights training in the TTCs and some of the management staff as well are also very positive about the utility and future of the training.

The TTC students appear to respond favorably to the child rights training prospects of the project. One teacher in a TTC said:

Only students of the third year get trained on CRC. We were approached by other students who ask but why they were not included? The content of the training is relevant, the method is suitable so all student joined in enthusiastically. It is obligatory that we understand children's rights. If we educationalist can apply it to our work, we are bound to success. This I learnt it from my own experience. (Teacher trainer, Son La Teacher Training College)

In strategic terms, the child rights trainings at the TTCs have taken forward the interpretation of and respect for child rights among the teachers in general. It has also created conditions that could, if used effectively, help promote and improve child rights education in primary schools. This project is considered rather unique as it seeks to take forward child rights education in the Vietnamese society

through an institutionalized process and channel that offers the possibility of large-scale dissemination and systematic diffusion.

CRC in the New Curriculum

Findings from evaluation of child rights education in primary schools pointed out potentials and the need for integration of CRC into the curriculum. All stakeholders show interest and concern for the education on child rights and recommend the subject to be introduced in all primary schools throughout the country to reach all primary school children. They mean that education on rights and obligations of children, which now is an extra curricular subject should be integrated into the regular subject of moral education. Up to 2000, CRC education was still an extra curricular activity and the quality and the implementation strongly depended on the exterior funding and teachers' motivation. An integration of the subject would mean that it could be taught, like a regular subject, throughout the year and it also means that this subject will be eligible to regular meetings throughout the year to increase the efficiency of lessons. As moral education is in a period of change and textbooks being rewritten, it is opportune to integrate child rights education into the regular curriculum.

Since 2001, SCS cooperated with The Research Center for Moral Education which is affiliated to the National Institute of Education Sciences (renamed in 2003 as the National Institute of Educational Strategy and Curriculum Development) to look for possibilities of integrating child rights in the subject. The process goes in line with MOET's plan to renew the primary school curriculum.

The on-going process of integrating child rights into the regular subject of moral education includes workshops with representatives from the MOET including authors of the new textbooks on moral education to review existing curriculum and textbook and design a frame for integrating child rights education into

the primary curriculum and textbook. The workshops had given the participants a chance to discuss which rights of the child should be included in the existing curriculum of moral education. In the past, students had only been taught about their obligations.

Comments/feedback from senior educationists were sought. Based on this frame, student textbooks and teacher's guidebook from Grades 1 to 5 were compiled. Learning and teaching aids were developed to facilitate teaching and learning of teachers and students. There were also training of education managers/administrators and key teachers on new methods of teaching and testing of the materials in two provinces. Based on teachers' comments, these materials are revised and finalized before they are printed for distribution nationwide.

One limitation is that this process took place after the curriculum frame had been approved by the Minister which means lesson topics have already been fixed. Child rights issues cannot be forced in but should go well with the topics.

Lessons Learnt/Challenges

Teachers and their training are of key importance to the success to child rights education program. Teachers in Vietnam work in a society which perceives children as having obligations rather than rights. For a teacher to internalize the education on the rights and obligations of the child she/he has to change her/his own values, knowledge, attitudes and subsequently behaviour from what she/he has grown up to believe in and act from. What made a difference was the degree to which the teacher had adopted the message and was able to apply the participatory methods.

Teachers play vital role in this activities but they were the last one trained in the long chain. The multi-tiered training process has had its disadvantages, watered down the message and no doubt made it more difficult for teachers

to internalize the message as well as the methods. Also, the quality of the activity depends largely on teachers' skills and motivation because the training they receive from MOET is not of high quality.

There was little time for them to practice skills so it depends much on their motivation and internalization of the subject. Without motivation lessons become boring. It is therefore essential that teachers must be given the opportunity to increase their skills, to become more flexible and creative.

Knowledge of child rights and obligations should be spread widely, so that it reaches the family. In this way the messages in school and at home are harmonized and the rights and obligations are balanced.

Endnote

1. UNICEF (2000), *Vietnam – Children and Women: A Situation Analysis*, UNICEF Vietnam, p. 30