



Exploring Vietnamese children's experiences of, and views on, learning at primary school in rural and remote communities



Renata Phelps^{a,*}, Anne Graham^a, Nhung Ha Thi Tuyet^b, Richard Geeves^c

^a Centre for Children and Young People, Southern Cross University, Lismore, Australia

^b ChildFund in Vietnam, ChildFund in Vietnam, Hanoi, Viet Nam

^c ChildFund Australia, Sydney, NSW, Australia

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Vietnam
Primary school
Children's perceptions
Learning
Children's agency

ABSTRACT

Developing countries face an urgent imperative to enhance the equity, quality and relevance of their education provision. Many international non-government organisations (NGOs) involved in such countries seek to work collaboratively with government organisations and communities to establish infrastructure, ensure equity in provision, build teachers' skills and raise participation rates. The views of children themselves are critical in ensuring that both educational policy and service provision are sensitive and responsive to their needs, and therefore more likely to work. This paper reports on a study which talked to rural Vietnamese children about their learning, including what they liked and did not like about their schools, what helps them learn, their relationships and sense of wellbeing at school, and their perceptions of the value of learning for their futures. The research challenged some prevailing assumptions about children's voice and agency in rural Vietnamese society while pointing to the possibilities and benefits of viewing children as partners in education rather than simply as beneficiaries.

Crown Copyright © 2014 Published by Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Recent years have witnessed an important shift in thinking in relation to the ways we understand childhood and children, including their rights and capacities 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 emergence of a broad interdisciplinary field of inquiry known as Childhood Studies, have challenged the ways in which children's voices have been excluded or marginalised in research, policy and practice. It is increasingly recognised that 'children and young people bring different, legitimate and valuable perspectives to significant policy debates' (Bessell, 2009, p. 62). In essence, these and other contributions reflect a growing acknowledgement of children as persons in their own right and as worthy of recognition, respect and 'voice' (Fitzgerald et al., 2010). Alongside this has been an increasing emphasis on the development of 'childcentred' scholarship (James and Prout, 1997; Jenks, 2005) and the importance of involving children in research (Kellett, 2005) and improvements to policy and practice (Percy-Smith and Thomas, 2010).

It is perplexing, then, that children and young people have very few avenues for expressing their views in relation to 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, 2009). Until recently there have been relatively few attempts to involve children and young people as active participants in classroom-based research and school initiatives (Flutter and Rudduck, 2004). This is despite a growing view 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). While schools in western educational systems have, in recent times, moved to establish initiatives such as student councils to provide a voice for students, the influence of such bodies 'rarely extends beyond the individual school into policy debates and decision-making' (Bessell, 2009, p. 62). As a result, children's perspectives remain largely excluded in discussions about education and educational quality.

A key example of this is highlighted in Schweisfurth's (2011) review of 72 articles focused on learner-centred education which had appeared in the *International Journal of Educational Development*. Noting the irony that the voice of young learners is largely missing from this body of literature, Schweisfurth concludes this review by asking such questions as: what are the views of young people on learner-centred education; what are their experiences of

* Corresponding author at: Centre for Children and Young People, Southern Cross University, P.O. Box 157, Southern Cross University, Lismore, NSW 2480, Australia. Tel.: +61 02 6620 3134; fax: +61 02 6622 1833.

E-mail addresses: renata.phelps@scu.edu.au, rphelps@scu.edu.au (R. Phelps).

classroom life under its implementation; and can they play an active part in its planning and implementation.

Whilst various debates persist in relation to who has the authority to speak in deciding matters of educational improvement (Cook-Sather, 2007, 2009), other more pragmatic perspectives suggest 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, that children's perspectives provide immense, largely unutilised potential for educational improvement.

In many developing countries support for such educational improvement, particularly in rural, regional and remote areas, falls to the international aid community, especially non-government organisations (NGOs). Guided by the UN Millennium Development Goals and the 'education for all' Dakar framework, international NGOs seek to redress poverty and disadvantage through enhanced quality and participation in education.

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. (Passingham et al., 2002, p. 1)

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 and Boyden, 2003a,b; Lytikainen et al., 2006; Schwartzman, 2005). Such developments are consistent with the UNCRC, which underlines the importance of children's views and perspectives in creating 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.

We turn now to discussion of a recent study that investigated children's views on learning and schooling in rural Vietnam. The research was a collaborative project between ChildFund Australia and the Centre for Children and Young People at Southern Cross University, Australia. In this paper we focus on notions of voice and agency in the context of schooling and in light of specific social and cultural influences on children and childhood in Vietnam. While the term 'student voice' is increasingly used in western contexts it appears there is no clear and definite conception of what this means (Cook-Sather, 2006). Some suggest student voice is at least partly dependent on how it is heard and whether 'voice' is transformed into 'action' or 'agency' (Holdsworth, 2000). Others argue that the term itself is problematic and possibly the concept of 'dialogue' may be more appropriate (see for example Fielding, 2007; Lodge, 2005). Hence, for the purpose of this paper and the study it reports, student voice is conceived of as 'covering a range of activities that encourage reflection, discussion, dialogue and action' (Fielding and McGregor, 2005, p. 2). Such a concept essentially challenges the notion of students as silent passive recipients of education (Cook-Sather, 2006).

After providing an overview of previous research, the views of the children about their learning and schooling are presented. The key findings and recommendations are then discussed with an emphasis on their relevance for the work of other international NGOs and educators seeking to improve education, in Vietnam and

elsewhere, through more participatory approaches with children and young people.

1.1. Why explore children's views on school?

The paucity of research considering education and schooling from the perspectives of children, in either developed or developing countries, largely reflects the traditional and conservative structures which shape educational systems internationally. Until very recently, research has given little more than cursory attention to children's views regarding their experiences of education, and seldom does such feedback have a significant influence on educational change and policy. However, as Bessell (2009, p. 58) has argued:

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.

Children's views contribute to a better understanding of their behaviour, and how they interact with family, peers and institutions. Such understandings are critical in developing effective policy responses to the challenges economically disadvantaged children in particular face (Redmond, 2008). Children's agency is increasingly recognised as a critical factor in helping them cope, adapt and contribute in various ways in their daily lives (Greene and Hill, 2006; Smart, 2002, 2006; Smith, 2002, 2007) and a substantial body of research points to the importance children, themselves, attribute to being recognised and acknowledged as capable of contributing to decisions made in their everyday lives (Graham, 2004; Parkinson et al., 2007; Smart, 2002; Taylor, 2006).

While in many countries children are now featured in contemporary social and political agendas, observers are increasingly voicing concerns about the extent to which their contributions are taken seriously, even in those policy and project initiatives intended to promote their participation (Davis et al., 2006; Davis and Hill, 2006; Hill et al., 2004; Kirby and Bryson, 2002; Morgan, 2005; Partridge, 2005; Percy-Smith, 2005; Thomas, 2006). As James (2007, p. 261) has cautioned:

... 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

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. (Wessells, 2005, p. 14)

Hence, in Western contexts, children's participation is often framed not only in terms of the idea of children as active 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 and Boyden, 2003b). There is 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

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/356118>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/356118>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)