Big city life: preschool teachers in Viet Nam deal with urban barriers to learning

While cities present many opportunities for sustainable development, urban stress on the quality of life in cities is a real challenge. Education too is a victim of cities’ fast-paced growth. In Da Nang, Viet Nam, VVOB – education for development and the Ministry of Education and Training are providing preschool teachers with professional development to both identify and mitigate barriers to learning experienced by their young learners in urban settings.

SDG4 in the fast-expanding cities

Cities are a crucial player in achieving SDG4. The SDGs are globally promoted but need to be translated into concrete action plans at the local level. Cities create many sustainable development opportunities for both individuals and society. However, an often underestimated but very present challenge in development today is fast-urban growth which creates specific social challenges for the development of young children. Vulnerable children such as those from families who have migrated and children growing up in economically challenged conditions are particularly prone to urban stress factors.

Early childhood services should adapt to the changing context but are challenged by the pace of change. Preschool teachers lack the capacity and methods to provide children with quality early learning experiences that help children connect with each other, the community and the environment and make them more resilient to urban stress.

Urban expansion and education as a theme in Viet Nam

The challenge of sustainable urban development is increasingly being recognized as a key development challenge. The national government of Viet Nam has engaged in earlier World Bank projects to address urban expansion. At the start of the school year 2018-2019, the prime minister of Viet Nam called for dedicated attention to the quality of schooling for children in industrial zones, thus creating an ideal policy base and political buy-in from the highest level.
Da Nang, one of the biggest cities in Central Viet Nam, is a typical example of a fast-expanding city, with many newcomers from rural provinces. Da Nang was the second city of Viet Nam to participate in UNICEF's Child-Friendly Cities initiative in 2019. However, urban growth puts pressure on the educational system: it exhausts the capacity of public schools while it also brings in urban stress. It is in this context that VVOB and the Da Nang Department of Education and Training (DOET) have joined forces in the “Communities of practice Inspiring Teaching Innovations in the Early Education System in Viet Nam” project (CITIES). In the first phase, the project aimed to analyse the urban barriers in Son Tra district, an industrial port district in Da Nang with many seasonal and migrant workers. The project also aimed to improve the performance and effectiveness of preschool teachers in this industrial area. At the same moment, the project created opportunities for the system to strengthen its capability to reflect, act and commit, to deliver and to adapt.
Creating awareness

There is a high level of commitment to this project in the education system: from Ministerial level, city authorities in Da Nang, to school level. Despite this, the project has uncovered a general lack of awareness on how growing up in a city can affect the learning and participation of preschool children and the role a school can play in mitigating the barriers.

By focusing on preschool children's wellbeing and involvement as a proxy for learning (applying Process Oriented Child Monitoring), teachers identified barriers both within and outside the school environment: Educational barriers included limited and unattractive materials, inappropriate didactics etc; Urban barriers to learning included limited time for parents to engage with children due to work, reduced parental well-being, limited clean, green and safe spaces for playful learning, new technologies replacing meaningful interactions with others etc. Taking part in the data collection, helped participants to see the link between the urban circumstances the children live in and their learning and participation in the classroom.

"Interestingly, the collection of data was, in fact, integral to the capacity development of participants".

Mitigating the barriers, reflecting on class practices

After identifying barriers, teachers, school leaders and officers started to implement innovative ways of mitigating the barriers to ensure that preschool early learning contributes to children's holistic development. A group of international and national artists exposed participants to applied artistic practices and interactive theatre methods to build socio-emotional skills and resilience. Due to COVID-measures, participants were exposed to innovative methods via online sessions. Between sessions, they tried out the methods with their families and neighbours. By the time schools had reopened, teachers could apply and directly felt the benefits of the methods in welcoming children back to school in these challenging times.
Thao and her colleagues during the online training

While adjusting their teaching practices, participating teachers and officers saw implementation opportunities for the early childhood education curriculum and relevant directives by the Ministry of Education and Training. They started to differentiate their practices based on the needs of the children in their class, moving away from the one size fits all approach whereby one can see the same materials and activities being applied throughout the country. For innovative activities to contribute to the holistic development of children, teachers need to be clear on the purpose. The project applied a variety of methods to help teachers reflect and capture changes in children (wellbeing and involvement) while trying out these activities.

“We were so worried that children would get dirty when we were doing the action paint activity. But the involvement of children was so high. We realised how we sometimes limit experiences for children.” Nguyen Thi Thanh Thao - vice-principal at Rang Dong preschool in Son Tra District.

"By the time schools had reopened, teachers could apply and directly felt the benefits of the methods in welcoming children back to school in these challenging times”.

Finding opportunities in the city
A city does not only create challenges but also offers tremendous opportunities for learning. In a second phase, the project will explore how the availability of arts and real-life learning opportunities in the city (such as storytelling murals, access to art, ...) can be an educational asset to overcome certain urban barriers. The target group will now take a more active role in communities of practice. They will investigate how the city assets can overcome the lack of green spaces to play and the changes in interactions between the child and its social context.

While it is not without its challenges, this project accompanies key actors in the education system to find the opportunities of urban living to tackle the urban barriers to learning, thus attempting to reduce inequalities and benefit the most disadvantaged.