

Quality Matters in Vietnamese Early Childhood Education: The Situation and the Challenge

Dinh Thi Thu HANG¹

Introduction

The question of quality in education is not new; many studies have dealt with quality in education as a reflection on the effect of implementing various processes on curricula, policies, material facilities, staff, and managers in this area. Most of them have demonstrated that high quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) has a significant effect on children's development, school readiness, their motivation for learning and later success in school, and both their cognitive and socio-emotional development (Burchinal, 2010). The definition and understanding of "quality" in ECEC differs among countries and depends on culture and changing descriptions of quality over time (Phillipsen, 1997).

Early childhood education (ECE) is the first level of the national education system in Vietnam, and nearly four million children attend Vietnamese preschools annually (General Statistics Office of Vietnam, 2016). The Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) has issued a target for sustainable development in education to 2025 and beyond, towards 2030 (MOET, The task and target of sustainable development in Education to 2025 and toward 2030, No.2161/QD-BGDDT., 2017). This report stipulated that all children of preschool age should be "nurtured and educated in high quality education and care settings." At the same time, the Renovation of General Education project (World Bank, Vietnam—renovation of general education project (No. PAD1081), 2015) aims to increase learner outcomes by revising the curriculum and enhancing the role of the teacher (i.e., in terms of teaching methods, instruction, and so on).

In this context, research examining the quality of Vietnamese ECE is essential. Thus, this paper aims to provide information about ECE levels in Vietnam, especially in terms of quality. The following topics are our focus:

- Focus Area 1: Vietnamese Early Childhood Education
- Focus Area 2: Quality Matters in Vietnamese Early Childhood Education

Focus Area 1 – Vietnamese Early Childhood Education

The Early Childhood Education Level in the National Education System

The Vietnamese national education system includes 12 years of basic education, including the primary level (5 years), secondary school (4 years), and high school (3 years). The Education Law 2005 defines ECE as a part of the national educational system; it is neither compulsory nor a prerequisite for entry into primary school (MOET, Law of Education, 2005).

Though ECE, as the first stage in Vietnam's national education system is not compulsory, it has several important functions: it promotes universal access to an early childhood setting for young children; provides high-quality education to support children's physical, social-emotional, intellectual, and aesthetic development; and it prepares children for school at Grade 1. ECE should lay the foundation for learning at all educational levels and lead to subsequent lifelong learning (MOET, Circular No.17, 2009).

ECE is provided in three kinds of childcare settings: preschools (for children 3 months–6 years); kindergartens (for children 3–6 years); and nurseries (for children 3 months–3 years). ECE settings can be classified as either public or non-public (semi-public and private) childcare settings. They must follow regulations issued by the MOET detailing their

¹ Research Institute of Early Childhood Education, Graduate School of Education, Hiroshima University, Japan

Table 1: Types of Vietnamese Preschools

Administration/Type	Public type	Private type
Establishing agency	The State	Social, socio-professional, or economic organizations, or individuals
Responsibility	-Investment in the construction of material facilities -Ensuring funding for the recurrent expenditure tasks	-Investing in the construction of material foundations -Ensuring operational funding via the non-state budget capital source(s)
Managing agency	People’s Committee of City, District	People’s Committee of Ward
Teachers	To have at least a 2-year college diploma with a specialization in kindergarten education Annual professional development training provided by the MOET	
Professional management agency	Division Education and Training (Local)	
Curriculum	The national curriculum	-Private schools use the national curriculum. -Private international schools use the international curriculum and Vietnamese language -The private, independent children’s group Casa uses both the national curriculum and its own curriculum

Curricula at the Early Childhood Education Level

The curriculum for early childhood education was written and published by the MOET. Preschool education aims to help children develop in all aspects; to form the first elements of their personality; prepare them for first grade; form and develop their physiological functions, abilities, and fundamental qualities; teach them essential life skills appropriate to their age; stimulate and maximize their potential, and lay the foundation for all future learning (MOET, Circular No.17, 2009).

The National Early Childhood Education and Care Curriculum consists of the Program for Education and Care of Crèches (3–36 months) and the Program for the Education and Care of Kindergartens (3-6 years), which are developed in line with the spirit of synchronized renovation in their objectives, contents, methods, and forms of organizing educational activities, and in the conditions for their implementation and assessment (MOET, Early Childhood Education Curricula, 2009).

The new curriculum, published in 2009, is based on the Education Law. Its aim works toward the holistic development of children, creating

opportunities for their ongoing development and ensuring the diversity of areas, and children personal. The new curriculum shifted the focus from teacher- to child-initiated actions, with small group activities and a focus on individual children (Hoang, 2017). The curriculum identifies five domains of development for children 6 years and younger: cognitive, language and literacy, physical, aesthetic, and social-emotional (MOET, 2009).

At preschools, children are involved in learning activities, free play, and hygiene activities. Learning includes intensive-learning and free-learning activities. Intensive learning refers to math, science, music, art, alphabet study, story-telling, and physical activity. These activities occur once a week, with the teacher composing the daily lesson plan based on the national framework. The teacher prepares materials and builds the question system, experiments, and games. During intensive learning activities, the teacher takes on the roles of leader, guide, manager, and supervisor. These activities have a limited duration for young children; however, they can end quickly or be extended, depending on the interests of the children (Pham, 2005).

Table 2: A Typical Preschool's Daily Schedule

Intensive Learning Activities	Free Play Activities		Hygiene Activities
	Indoors	Outdoor Activities	
- Limited time, depending on children’s age - Teacher composes a lesson plan based on the national framework - Includes: math, science, music, art, alphabet study, story-telling, physical education	Playing with peers and teacher	-Physical exercise -Walking -Playground	-Personal hygiene -Meals -Nap time

The Quality of Vietnamese Early Childhood Education

Today, ECE levels in Vietnam are being affected by several projects aimed at improving children’s learning outcomes through the revision of curricula and increasing the effectiveness of teaching and instruction. These include the Vietnam school readiness promotion project (World Bank 2013, 2017) and the Renovation of General Education Project (World Bank, 2015).

Further, on June 13, 2012, Vietnamese President Nguyen Tan Dung signed Decision 711/QDD-TTg “Education Development Strategy 2011-2020” (Nguyen, 2012; Socialist Republic of Viet

Nam Government Portal, 2012). The goals for ECE in 2020 are stated as being to “Complete the universal preschool education for children 5 years old by 2015; to 2020, at least 30% children in nursery-aged and 80% in kindergarten-aged are nurtured and educated at child-care settings; the rate of malnourished children in the child-care centers decreases to under 10%” (Nguyen, 2012).

Based on the report by the Ministry of Education and Training and data from General Statistics Office of Vietnam, 2017, we can clearly see the high enrollment of children 6 years and younger, and especially those 5 and under.

Biểu đồ 8, so sánh tỷ lệ huy động trẻ đến trường của giáo dục mầm non năm học 2014-2015 và 2015-2016

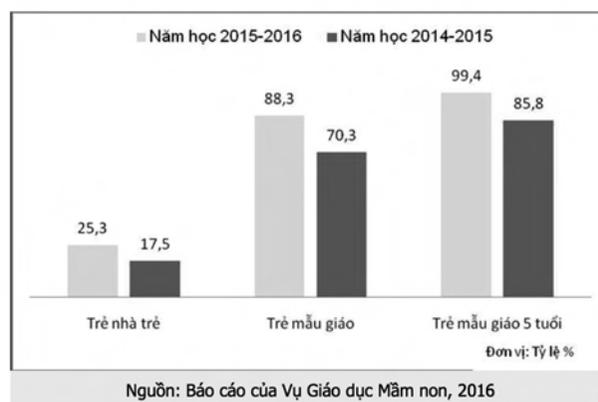


Figure 1. Year-on-Year Comparison of Children Entering Preschool

In addition, the number of preschools and teachers at this level, and the number of preschools certified by the national standards, has increased.

Table 3: Numbers of Preschools, Classes, Teachers, and Pupils

Kindergarten education as of 30 September by Items, Indicator and Year									
	2008-2009	2009-2010	2010-2011	2011-2012	2012-2013	2013-2014	2014-2015	2015-2016	Prel. 2016-2017
Total									
School	12,071.0	12,265.0	12,678.0	13,144.0	13,548.0	13,841.0	14,179.0	14,513.0	14,863.0
Class	103.9	106.6	119.4	118.0	122.0	125.5	133.5	147.2	150.3
Teacher	138.1	144.5	157.5	174.0	188.2	204.9	215.5	231.9	250.8
Pupil	2,774.0	2,909.0	3,061.3	3,320.3	3,551.1	3,614.1	3,755.0	3,978.5	4,409.6
Pupils per class	26.7	27.0	26.0	28.0	29.0	29.0	28.0	27.0	29.0
Pupils per teacher	20.1	20.0	19.0	19.0	19.0	18.0	17.0	17.0	18.0

Source: General Statistics Office of Vietnam, 2017

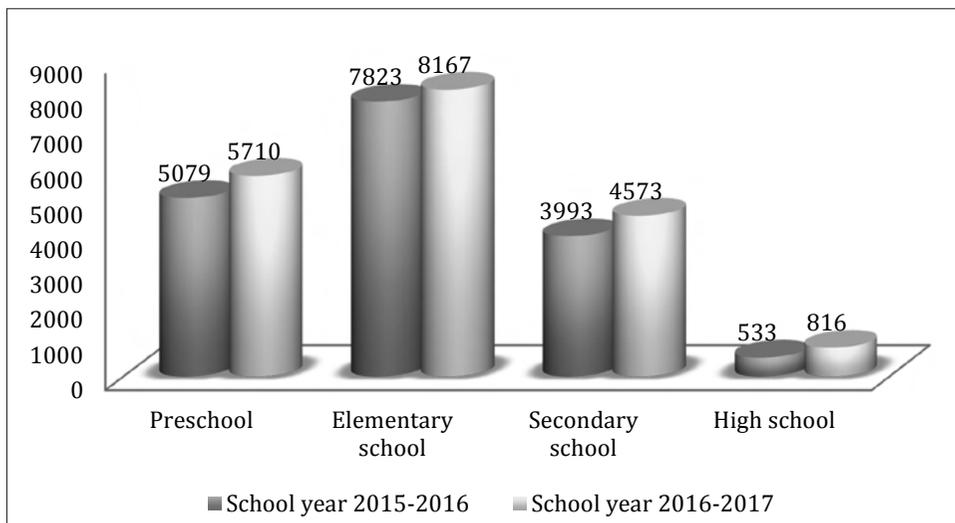


Figure 2. The number of schools achieving the National standard

Focus Area 2 – Quality Matters in Vietnamese Early Childhood Education

Defining “Quality” at the Early Childhood Education Level

“The quality preschool education is satisfaction the goals of preschool, make sure the request of the education’s purposes in Education Law, suitable with the local and country’s socio-economic development” (MOET, Circular No19/2018/TT-BGDĐT, 2018).

In Vietnamese ECE, assessing the processes of preschools, crèches, or kindergartens is based on a circular and regulations established by the MOET. In 2011, the MOET issued Circular No 45/2011/TT-BGDĐT, which provided “Rules of Procedure and Period Accreditation of Education in Preschool.” Then, in 2014, the MOET continued the effort by enforcing Circular No.02/2014/TT-BGDĐT, which recognized those preschools meeting the national standards. Following these circulars, the Department of Education and Training and the Department of Early Childhood Education in each city or locality were tasked with enforcing the requirements that match their location.

The evaluation process includes criteria-based assessments of the quality of teaching and children’s learning. This task is assigned to each school, class, and teacher. These assessment methods include: assessing at the end of day, assessing at the end of a topic, assessing at the end of the term, and assessing

at the end of the school year (MOET, 2009). According the Charter for Preschools issued by the MOET via 14/2008/QĐ-BGDĐT, Article 25 assigns a documenting system, books, and records to facilitate the nurturing, caring for, and teaching of children. Schools are tasked with the profile management of their students, and teachers profile and monitor children.

Assessing the Quality of Children’s Learning

The form used to assess children’s learning was designed by school-based rules imposed by the DET and MOET (MOET, Charter of Preschool, 2008). Educators use daily and periodic evaluations to test and assess children’s development processes by collecting data and collating it, with the aim of improving the ECE curriculum.

At the kindergarten level, the methods used are as follows:

- Observation
- Interactions and communication with children
- Using circumstance
- Using learning exercises
- Analyzing children’s work
- Information exchanges with parents

Evaluating each child’s development (including everyday evaluations and assessments for young children by stages) for monitoring purposes should be used as the basis for planning and making timely adjustments to the children’s education plan,

while taking into account the actual situation in the school. The assessment must employ a combination of methods and forms of assessment, so that it seriously evaluates the progress of each child and is based on regular observations of his or her daily activities (MOET, Circular No.17, 2009).

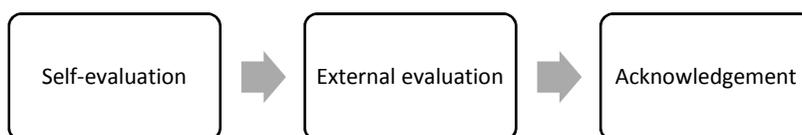
The examinations, tests, and evaluating the results of education and training should be done gradually and according to advanced criteria established and trusted by the world’s social and educational community. Coordination using assessment results as a part of the learning process can include final, or end of yet evaluations, evaluation of teachers via learners’ self-assessments, and evaluations by schools to evaluate the populations’ families and culture (Resolution No. 29-NQ / TW).

However, the Vietnamese ECE assessment environment has not been created in a clear and scientific way. Teachers implement them only cursorily and seem not to be really interested in the topic. Assessments in preschools today still include a great emphasis on results and less focus on children’s abilities. The present assessment aims to

rank children based on their study results, but lacks comments; evaluations rely solely on the available answers while ignoring children’s creativity. This has a considerable influence on fostering their interest and ability. Currently, the MOET is interested in reforming the education system completely, and kindergarten teachers are working systematically to approach assessments based on the real ability principle. It is difficult to understand the capacity of an assessment; however, it is even more difficult to apply this. Therefore, more specific research tools are needed that can measure students’ overall capacity in general, and in their school environment in particular. This will provide teachers with useful referencing resources and make it possible for them to assess their students’ capacity more clearly. We need a reliable and valid assessment tool to make the process of adjusting and enforcing ECEC programs to yield high quality results.

Assessing the Quality of a Preschool

The process for evaluating a preschool’s quality is illustrated below.



(MOET, Circular No19/2018/TT-BGDĐT, 2018)

Self-evaluation	External evaluation
Preschool is based on the standards of assessment issued and managed by the MOET. Teachers self-check, test the quality nurturing and caring, and the test the teaching processes in use. The facilities and other related issues are evaluated to adjust the resources and their implementation process’ progress toward meeting the preschool evaluation standards.	The state education management agencies carry out the survey and assessment process for preschools to define what level they are meeting the MOET’s preschool evaluation standards.
MOET issued the preschool evaluation standards. Each standard includes preschool evaluation criteria. The specific content of each criterion includes the request indicator.	

We have five standards for assessing the quality of a preschool. They are:

- Preschool organization and management
- Preschool managers, teachers, and staff
- Preschool facilities and teaching materials
- The relationships between the preschool and children’s families and society
- The activity and results of nurturing, caring for, and educating children

Current Problems at the ECE Level

A study of educational practices in relation to ECEC (MOET, 2001, cited in Hoang, N et al., 2018c) demonstrated that teaching practices and curricula were teacher-initiated and focused on learning goals, regardless of children's interests. This led to decreased student engagement and reduced interest in learning. In Vietnam, traditional didactic methods of instruction have been more popular than play-based pedagogical approaches. Most teachers use older, more traditional teaching methods, which involve the teacher as the primary speaker and the students as the primary listeners (Dang and Boyd, 2014; UNESCO-UNICEF, 2012). By contrast, Vietnamese ECE is determined in a top-down way, so that teachers must follow and strictly implement the guidelines provided by the Ministry of Education and Training (Hoang, N et al., 2018b)

Some previous studies have indicated that ECE teachers who work in rural areas and have direct involvement in an ECE program have no supervision from a government body, do not receive adequate professional development, and report feeling demoralized and overloaded when they first began working to implement the reforms required of them in ECE (MOET, 2006; UNESCO, 2006).

In addition, in some mountainous regions, there are no trained teachers, so the quality of ECEC programs is low and parents are not inclined to send their children to preschool, as they cannot see the benefit (UNESCO-UNICEF, 2013). In urban areas, under the pressures brought on by the needs of working parents, school group sizes are estimated to be one and a half to two times greater than the recommended levels (Dang and Boyd, 2014).

The existing means of assessment focus on children's outcomes and learning goals (MOET, 2009; Hoang, N et al., 2018c). The results of monitoring these outcomes, if used to determine "school readiness," may negatively impact children's development. The risk is that some children may be labelled as failures at the very start of their school career (cited in OECD, 2015, p.168-169). Another concern over the focus on child outcomes and their measurement at an early age is "schoolification," so that the focus of ECEC shifts away from children's participation and specific

pedagogical approaches for young children (OECD, Starting Strong IV: Monitoring Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care, 2015).

Discussion

As the literature on monitoring quality in ECEC suggests, monitoring children's well-being, development, and outcomes can play an important role in proving staff practices and service provision; thus, it can enhance children's development (Litjents, 2013). The monitoring of child development or outcomes can help ECEC staff to identify children's needs and support their development. It is thus a key component of the development and teaching or caring cycle (Barblett, 2010). The monitoring of children's development is a crucial part of making information on their skills and development available to ECEC staff and parents and for informing them about teachers' decisions. Such knowledge can improve staff interactions with children and help adapt curricula and standards to meet children's needs (Litjents, 2013).

Despite the above, the results of monitoring children's outcomes must be approached with caution. For instance, while diagnostic work is important, if it is used to determine "school readiness" with the goal of delaying or denying school entry, it may negatively impact children's development, and some children may be labeled as failures at the very start of their school career. Postponing admission to school has not been linked to better performance, and such delays can deprive children of interactions with their peers, which is a key opportunity for cognitive development. Children subject to such delays have also been found to display more behavior problems than those who enter school with peers of the same age.

This paper highlights the use of assessment tools that are more objective than those used in the past. It supports the notion that educators at this level need to research and choose suitable tools using for evaluating children's development, the quality of their teaching processes, and the quality of the preschool itself. The tools used in many countries can be adjusted for relevance to the Vietnamese context. Last but not least, this paper relies on the specific view of Vietnamese ECE, thus

it will help teachers, managers, and educators to improve educational quality and outcomes for children.

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