

A comparative analysis of Vietnamese and Australian Early Childhood Education: Emphasis on play-based learning, relational pedagogy & contextualising children's learning through collaboration with families.

Lisa Williamson, January 2024

About the Author

Lisa Williamson is a distinguished Senior Early Childhood Education and Care educator, widely recognized as an industry expert and passionate advocate for the well-being and development of young children. With a wealth of experience, Lisa has dedicated her career to shaping the landscape of early childhood education, consistently demonstrating a deep commitment to fostering a nurturing and enriching environment for young learners. Her expertise extends beyond the classroom, as she actively engages in advocacy efforts to promote policies that prioritize the importance of early childhood education.

Lisa's profound impact is evident in her innovative teaching methods, mentorship of fellow educators, and tireless work towards ensuring that every child receives the best possible foundation for a lifetime of learning and success. Her leadership and dedication make her a standout figure in the field, inspiring positive change and influencing the future of early childhood education.



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Abstract

Early Childhood Education (ECE) plays a crucial role in laying the foundation for a child's lifelong learning, development & wellbeing (Harvard University Centre on the Developing Child). This comparative analysis focuses on key aspects of ECE in Vietnam and Australia, with a special emphasis on barriers to ECE professional knowledge and skills in the implementation of a collaborative model of early childhood education with its key foci being play-based learning, relational pedagogy, and collaborating in partnership with families to ensure culturally contextualised learning for individual children. In comparing, this analysis also articulates the value and benefits of Australian ECE Vocational Education and Training for ECE students from Vietnam.

Introduction

Early childhood education plays a pivotal role in shaping the future of a nation by nurturing the cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development of young minds. This comparative analysis aims to delve into the differences between Vietnamese and Australian early childhood education systems, with a particular focus on play-based learning, holistic child development and the importance of partnerships with families (Rogoff 2008). It also explores the influence of government policies in Vietnam and explores the value of exposing Vietnamese educators to further training in Australia to enhance and support the development of the Vietnamese sector.

What is Early Childhood Education and Care (ECE)?

Early childhood education and care (ECE) encompasses a comprehensive and formative stage of learning that focuses on the development of young children, typically from birth to around eight years old. This crucial period lays the foundation for a child's cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development. ECE programs aim to provide a nurturing and stimulating environment where children can explore, play, and learn through various activities tailored to their developmental needs. In addition to fostering academic readiness, early childhood education and care emphasise the cultivation of essential life skills, social interactions, and emotional well-being. Quality ECE is often characterised by qualified educators, age-appropriate curricula, and a focus on individualised learning experiences that recognise the unique strengths and needs of each child. The integration of care components ensures that children receive not only educational support but also a safe, supportive, and inclusive space that promotes their overall growth and prepares them for future educational endeavours and long-term health and wellbeing.

Early Childhood Education in Vietnam

In Vietnam, enrolment rates for early childhood education (ECE) are high, as is the value of academic achievement. Amongst its population of nearly 100 million people, Vietnam has over five million children attending Early Childhood Centres and Kindergartens. There are approximately 5.15 million children from 3 months old to 6 years old attending 15,476 nurseries and kindergartens. (Thanh Van Thai et al 2021). Also, there are 326,332 early childhood teachers (MOET, 2019).

Early childhood education and care services consist of nurseries (for babies from 3 months to 3 years old), kindergartens (for children from 3 to 6 years old), and young 'sprout' schools, consolidating nurseries and kindergartens, for children from 3 months old to 6 years. (Thanh Van Thai et al 2021).

The traditional approach to early childhood education in Vietnam has been significantly influenced by various government policies throughout its history. During the colonial period, French educational policies had a lasting impact on the structure and content of the education system, including early childhood education. Post-independence, the Vietnamese government continued to shape early childhood education through policies aimed at aligning education with socialist principles. In the late 20th century, the government emphasised universal access to education, resulting in increased enrolment in preschools across the country.

In more recent times, the Vietnamese government has recognised the need for a shift towards a more holistic and child-centred approach in early childhood education. Policies such as the Revised General Education Curriculum (2018) have been instrumental in promoting play-based learning and holistic child development. This shift reflects a commitment to adapting educational practices to meet the evolving needs of young learners in the 21st century. The National Action Plan on Early Childhood Care and Education (2018-2025) further underscores the government's dedication to enhancing the quality of early childhood education, emphasising comprehensive care and development for young children.

Holistic child development is gaining prominence in the Vietnamese early childhood education system. The focus is not solely on academic achievements but extends to encompass the physical, social, emotional, and cognitive well-being of the child. This holistic approach aligns with global perspectives on early childhood education, recognising that a well-rounded individual is better equipped to face the challenges of the future.

Government initiatives, such as the National Action Plan on Early Childhood Care and Education (2018-2025), underscore the commitment to holistic child development in Vietnam. The plan advocates for comprehensive early childhood care and education services that address the diverse needs of children, promoting their physical, cognitive, and socio-emotional development.

While these policies signal a positive trajectory, challenges in implementation persist, including resource constraints and the need for ongoing teacher training. The interplay of historical factors and evolving government policies has shaped the traditional approach to early childhood education in Vietnam, and contemporary policies aim to strike a balance between cultural values and modern educational principles.

Early Childhood Education in Australia

Australia currently has a population of 26,638,544 million (ABS 2023) and has 48% of 0–5-year-olds (883,510 children) children enrolled in 15,845 ECEC services in the March quarter of 2022. (AUST. GOV. Dept of Education Feb 2023) (ACECQA Snapshot Oct 23).

Early childhood education and care services consist of centre-based long day care (birth to 5 years), Preschool (3-5 years) and family day care (birth to five years).

In Australia Early Childhood Education is viewed as a time for enjoying childhood, a time to develop strong social & emotional skills and positive dispositions for learning through play. The Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) aligns with these values and measures five key areas of early childhood development as children transition from an early childhood education & care setting to a school-based setting. These domains are physical health and wellbeing; social competence; emotional maturity; language and cognitive skills; communication skills and general knowledge.

Australia has been a pioneer in promoting play-based, holistic learning in early childhood education. The Australian early childhood education philosophy, inspired by theorists such as Vygotsky (1966), Barbara Rogoff (2008) & Australian Laureate Professor, Marilyn Fleer (2023), places a strong emphasis on child-initiated learning through play. The Early Years Learning Framework of Australia – Belonging, Being & Becoming (EYLF) has guided educators in fostering children's holistic development, recognising the interconnectedness of learning domains since 2009. In 2022, version 2 of the EYLF was released utilising contemporary research evidence and including the new and revised Practices of:

- Holistic, integrated and interconnected approaches
- Responsiveness to children
- Play-based learning and intentionality
- Learning environments
- Cultural responsiveness
- Continuity of learning and transitions
- Assessment and evaluation for learning, development and wellbeing.

Play-based learning, relational pedagogy & contextualising children's learning through working in partnerships with families is considered foundational in Australian early childhood settings, providing children with opportunities to explore, experiment, and interact in a supportive environment. The emphasis on holistic development aligns with the belief that every child is unique, and their learning experiences should encompass cognitive, social, emotional, physical, cultural aspects and opportunities to learn and use their first language.

Contrast in Pedagogical Approaches

While both Vietnam and Australia now recognise the significance of play-based learning and holistic child development, there are differences in the implementation of these philosophies. Vietnamese early childhood education is still in the process of transitioning from a traditional, academically focused, teacher focused model to one that embraces more child-centred and exploratory approaches.

In Vietnam, the Project for Development of Preschool Education (2018-2025) underscores the importance of creating a play-based learning environment to enhance children's cognitive, social, and emotional development. Generally speaking, Vietnamese children achieve higher outcomes than other lower- and middle-income countries.

This is however not the case for children from poor rural and urban backgrounds, nor for children from ethnic minorities. Even with the Project for Development of Preschool Education (2018-2025) in place, ECE pedagogy and children's learning is still very teacher centric and academically focused on its delivery. This is in contrast to many of the goals of the Project for Development of Preschool Education (2018-2025) which calls for a fostering of development of a breadth (not merely academic) of skills, including creativity, flexibility, critical thinking and socio-emotional skills. (Cabus, S.J., Lenaerts, F., Nguyen, T.M.T., Nguyen, T.T., Le Thi Dieu, P., Nguyen, H.P. 2022).

'The last decade has been marked by radical curriculum and pedagogical reforms in Vietnamese early childhood education (ECE). In essence, the reforms are paradigm shifts from teacher-centred to child-centred pedagogy, and from fragmented subject-based to a holistic integrated curriculum. Studies (Phan, 2005; Le, 2009, Nguyen, 2009) suggest that ECE teachers are struggling to enact the shifts. One of the reasons is speculated as the mismatch between what early childhood teacher education (ECTE) can offer and what new ECE practice needs.' (Phan Thi, Thu Hien 2017).

In contrast, Australian early childhood education has a well-established foundation in play-based learning, relational pedagogy & contextualising children's learning through working in partnerships with families. The EYLF encourages educators to create environments that support children's agency, allowing them to make choices, solve problems, and engage in meaningful play. This approach fosters a love for learning and lays the groundwork for a successful transition to formal education.

In Australia, ECE Educators place a strong emphasis on play as a medium for learning. Research by Fleer and van Oers (2018) supports the idea that play-based learning enhances children's creativity, problem-solving skills, and socio-emotional development in diverse cultural contexts. The Early Years Learning Framework of Australia – Belonging, Being & Becoming (EYLF) (2022), has a specific emphasis on play-based learning and the intentional role played by both educators and children in extending and enriching learning in a culturally responsive manner.

Challenges and Opportunities

While progress has been made in both Vietnamese and Australian early childhood education, there are challenges and opportunities for future development in each context. In Vietnam, the challenge lies in effectively implementing and sustaining the shift towards play-based learning and holistic child development. Adequate teacher training, resource allocation, and ongoing support are essential to ensure the success of these initiatives.

The Vietnamese education system, despite making commendable strides in recognising the importance of early childhood education, faces challenges in adequately equipping

educators with the skills necessary for implementing new approaches such as play-based learning and holistic child development. Historically rooted in a more traditional, academically focused model, the system is in the midst of a significant transition. However, limited resources, outdated teaching methodologies, and a lingering emphasis on rote memorisation pose obstacles to the effective training of early childhood educators in innovative practices. The transformation towards child-centred learning requires a comprehensive overhaul of teacher training programs, continuous professional development opportunities, and a shift in the cultural perception of education. Without addressing these systemic issues, the Vietnamese education system may struggle to fully prepare early childhood educators to meet the evolving needs of young learners in the 21st century.

Implementing a play-based, holistic curriculum in early childhood services is crucial for fostering holistic child development. However, Vietnamese early childhood teachers encounter several challenges and barriers in integrating such an approach. Understanding these obstacles is essential for addressing them and promoting effective play-based learning in Vietnam.

The enduring isolation of Vietnamese Early Childhood Education (ECE) within the global context appears to contribute to challenges in the conceptualisation of Early Childhood Teacher Education (ECTE). There is compelling evidence indicating that the influence of past educational beliefs plays a role in the unclear comprehension of the new ECE philosophy. For instance, the ingrained transmissive teaching style, an emphasis on subject knowledge, and the prioritisation of achieving learning outcomes at the expense of fostering "how to learn" skills hinder ECE professionals from grasping the concept of active learning (Le 2009b; Phan 2005). The prolonged adherence to rigid teaching plans provided by the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) seems to impede many ECE teachers in developing their own teaching agendas (Nguyen 2009; Phan 2005). Likewise, studies reveal that the familiarity with a subject-based curriculum poses challenges for ECE teachers in comprehending an integrated curriculum, leading to strained and illogical connections in their attempts to integrate key learning areas (Nguyen 2009; Phan 2005).

Vietnamese Early Childhood Education (ECE) practitioners acknowledge that the variation in viewpoints and methodologies does not represent a form of "quality in diversity" or an innovative adaptation of the new ECE approach into practical application. Instead, this disparity is linked to a state of perplexity and uncertainty regarding the comprehension of the new ECE program. An educator specialising in Early Childhood Education asserts, "To be honest, there is still no consensus on the understanding of the new program and no sound grasp of it" (Phan, 2012, p. 162).

Vietnam's diverse linguistic and cultural landscape adds another layer of complexity. Developing play-based activities that resonate with children from various linguistic and cultural backgrounds requires careful consideration. Teachers may face challenges in adapting play-based approaches to be inclusive and culturally sensitive.

Relational pedagogy, which focuses on building positive teacher-child relationships, is integral to both Vietnamese and Australian early childhood education. In Vietnam, the study by Thanh Van Thai et al. (2021) emphasises the importance of a holistic approach, integrating relational pedagogy to support children's well-being and learning. Australian research by Brunsek et al. (2020) reinforces the positive impact of professional development of early childhood educators on children's outcomes, highlighting the role of supportive teacher-child relationships in fostering a conducive learning environment.

Collaboration with families is a cornerstone of quality early childhood education in both countries. The Vietnamese approach, as outlined in The Project for Development of Preschool Education (2018-2025), emphasises involving families in the educational process to create a more holistic learning experience. Similarly, Australia's Early Years Learning Framework underscores the importance of partnerships with families to support children's learning and development. The Australian framework recognises families as the child's first and most influential educators, promoting a collaborative approach to enhance the child's educational journey.

Contextual Learning: Ensuring contextual learning is vital for addressing the diverse needs and backgrounds of children. In Vietnam, the empirical study by VVOB (All It Takes: A Teacher to Know Children) emphasises the importance of understanding children's cultural and social contexts to enhance their overall development. *'Despite Vietnam's successful campaign to reach universal pre-school education at age 5, many of these children are 'not ready for learning' in primary school because they are vulnerable on at least one developmental domain. Among those children, ethnic minority children are most at risk of not being school-ready.'* (VVOB 2024)

One significant obstacle hindering the learning and engagement of children, particularly those belonging to ethnic minority communities, is the language barrier. The exclusive use of the Vietnamese language for instruction poses challenges. Upon observation, it becomes evident that during the preschool years, children have limited chances for verbal expression or other activities that facilitate a comprehensive mastery of the language of instruction. Teachers often employ teacher-directed methods in the classroom, resulting in restricted meaningful interactions and a scarcity of language-rich experiences crucial for language development (VVOM 2024)

In Australia, the Early Years Learning Framework encourages educators to consider each child's background, culture, and experiences to provide a contextually rich learning environment. It also espouses the importance of sustained, shared conversations and thinking between educators and children *'Educators promote this learning for all children when they, for example: engage in sustained communication with children about ideas and experiences, and extend their vocabulary, value children's linguistic heritage and with family and community members encourage the use of and acquisition of home languages and Standard Australian English'* (EYLF pg. 58)

Recognising the cultural diversity within Vietnam & Australia, ECE students studying VET and Early Childhood Educators in Australia utilise 'Belonging, Being and Becoming the Early Years Learning Framework of Australia (EYLF)' which includes the Practice of Cultural Responsiveness. The EYLF emphasises the importance of culturally sensitive teaching practices. Educators & students are guided in incorporating local cultures and languages into their curriculum planning, making education more meaningful and inclusive for all children and their families.

Parents' expectations regarding academic achievements may conflict with the perceived 'informal' nature of play-based learning. Societal pressure for children to excel academically from an early age may create resistance to play-based approaches. Communicating the benefits of play-based learning to parents and addressing societal expectations becomes crucial but challenging for teachers. In Australia, there are initiatives such as the Australian Governments Starting Blocks website and the Raising Children Network which are utilised by families and educators to further their understanding of play-based learning, relational pedagogy & contextualising children's learning through collaborating in partnerships with families.

The opportunity is not one-sided. In Australia, ongoing efforts are needed to address issues related to inclusivity and cultural responsiveness. Recognising and valuing the cultural diversity of children and families is crucial to creating inclusive early childhood education environments. Collaborative research and initiatives that focus on culturally responsive practices can contribute to overcoming these challenges. This has recently been addressed in Australia with the revised EYLF v2 where the Practice of Cultural Responsiveness guides Educators to '*Respect multiple cultural ways of knowing, doing and being and celebrate the benefits of diversity. Honour differences and take action in the face of unfairness or discrimination, respect and work collaboratively with culturally and linguistically diverse children and families*' (EYLF pg. 23)

In summary, the practice of Cultural Responsiveness in the EYLF supports educators in creating inclusive, equitable, and culturally rich learning environments. It emphasises respect for diversity, collaboration with families, building cultural competence, and reflective practices to enhance the educational experiences of children from multiple cultural contexts.

In addressing these challenges, a comprehensive approach involving professional development, advocacy, and collaboration is necessary. Recognising the value of play-based learning, relational pedagogy and collaborative partnerships with families in nurturing well-rounded individuals and fostering a supportive ecosystem can contribute to overcoming these barriers and promoting effective early childhood education in Vietnam.

The Role of Training in Creating High Quality Early Childhood Educators

High-quality training plays a pivotal role in supporting the development of good-quality resources in the early childhood education and care sector. Educators armed with comprehensive and up-to-date training are better equipped to understand the diverse needs of young learners, implement effective teaching strategies, and create a stimulating learning environment. Quality training programs empower educators to design and adapt resources that align with best practices in early childhood education, fostering a holistic approach to child development. This includes the creation of age-appropriate materials that cater to individual learning styles, encourage exploration, and promote critical thinking. Moreover, well-trained educators can effectively integrate technology, multicultural perspectives, and evidence-based methodologies into their teaching, ensuring that the resources provided are not only engaging but also aligned with the latest pedagogical advancements. Ultimately, the investment in high-quality training for early childhood educators translates into the development and utilisation of resources that have a lasting positive impact on the educational experiences of young children.

High-quality training has been a cornerstone of Australia's renowned early childhood education sector, contributing significantly to its reputation for excellence. Australian educators undergo rigorous training programs that emphasise contemporary pedagogical approaches, including play-based learning, holistic child development, relational pedagogy and partnerships with families. The Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF), a key component of Australia's National Quality Framework, guides educators in creating rich, child-centred environments that prioritise individualised learning experiences.

Australian training programs also focus on fostering cultural responsiveness, ensuring that educators are equipped to cater to the diverse needs of children and families in a multicultural society. The emphasis on continuous professional development enables educators to stay abreast of the latest research, methodologies, and technological advancements, allowing them to create dynamic and responsive learning resources.

This commitment to high-quality training has positioned Australia as a global leader in early childhood education. The sector's reputation is further enhanced by the country's dedication to regulatory frameworks, quality standards, and ongoing evaluation, ensuring that educators are well-prepared to deliver superior educational experiences for young learners. The success of Australia's early childhood education sector is a testament to the transformative impact of quality training on educators, ultimately shaping the sector's global standing.

Opportunities for Australia to Support the Development of the Vietnamese Early Childhood Education Sector

Despite the advancements in Vietnamese early childhood education, there is a growing trend among Vietnamese educators to pursue studies in Australia. The decision to study in Australia is often motivated by the desire to gain exposure to the well-established play-based learning practices and holistic child development approaches that have been successfully implemented in Australian early childhood education settings.

Exposure to Australian training programs and full qualifications offer Vietnamese educators' insights into the latest pedagogical approaches, curriculum development strategies, and practical teaching methodologies. This exposure equips educators with the knowledge and skills needed to implement innovative practices in Vietnamese early childhood education settings, contributing to the ongoing transformation of the sector.

Studying in Australia offers a transformative opportunity for Vietnamese early childhood educators to bridge the gaps in their training and bring back valuable insights into the innovative approaches to early childhood education. Australian institutions are renowned for their expertise in fostering play-based learning and holistic child development. Vietnamese educators gain access to innovative pedagogical methods, contemporary curriculum design principles, and practical teaching strategies.

Australian education emphasises experiential learning, encouraging educators to understand the intricacies of implementing play-based approaches and nurturing holistic development in children. Exposure to a multicultural and diverse educational environment in Australia enriches the educators' perspectives, fostering a global mindset that can be translated into effective teaching practices back in Vietnam.

Moreover, studying in Australia provides Vietnamese educators with opportunities for networking and collaboration with international peers, sharing best practices, and building partnerships with Australian educational institutions. The cross-cultural experiences gained during their studies empower educators to adapt and tailor innovative teaching methodologies to the Vietnamese context.

Upon returning to Vietnam, educators who have studied in Australia can play a pivotal role in influencing systemic changes within the education sector. Their enriched knowledge and skills can contribute to the development of updated training programs, the implementation of new policies, and the cultivation of a more progressive and child-centric approach to early childhood education in Vietnam. In essence, studying in Australia becomes a catalyst for positive change, allowing Vietnamese educators to bring home a wealth of expertise that can elevate the quality of early childhood education in their home country.

Conclusion

This research has provided a comprehensive analysis of the differences in Vietnamese and Australian early childhood education, emphasising play-based learning, holistic child development, relational pedagogy and partnerships with families. The influence of

government policies in both countries, the evolving pedagogical approaches, and the significance of cross-cultural learning experiences for educators have been explored.

The decision of Vietnamese educators to study in Australia reflects a commitment to adopting innovative practices and contributing to the ongoing transformation of early childhood education in Vietnam. Collaborative initiatives between the two countries further strengthen the exchange of knowledge and expertise, fostering a global perspective in early childhood education practices.

As both Vietnam and Australia continue to prioritise the holistic development of young children, the challenges and opportunities presented by these initiatives pave the way for a brighter future. By addressing the challenges and capitalising on the opportunities, both countries can contribute to the creation of nurturing environments that empower children to thrive and become active participants in shaping their communities and the world at large.

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