

## Research Partnership Case Studies

# Gia Lai Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD) Project

### Background to the research:

Plan in Vietnam is implementing an Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD) project in seven communes in Gia Lai province, Vietnam, between 2012-2018.

To measure the impact of the project and to build an evidence base for advocating to donors, government and partners on the importance of ECCD for education outcomes and reducing inequality, a three-year research study is being led by a team of six academics from Monash University, Melbourne, and the University of Auckland, working in partnership with Plan International Australia and Plan International Vietnam. The project is funded by the New Zealand Aid Program (NZAP), with support from Australian Aid.

The research aims to identify the strengths and limitations of the project with a view to improving components that will have a larger impact on children's development and learning skills needed for primary school. The study will also form part of the final evaluation of the project and will be the basis for developing policy papers on key areas of need in the Vietnam context, to help strengthen government understanding of, and commitment to, holistic and integrated ECCD in Vietnam.

### Interest in the research partnership:

*Contribution to achieving development impact is a key focus of all partners involved in this research.*

Focus on improving lives of the most marginalised children and their families is a key focus of the research. Ensuring quality outcomes and demonstrating impact in order to influence policy and replication of the project is a priority for Plan International Vietnam and Plan International Australia. This is especially important for Plan International Australia, which sees the project as a significant investment, and demonstrating impact and influencing policy as an important means of leveraging the initial investment. Likewise, for Plan International Vietnam, ECCD is a big program within the country and the research is viewed as a way to inform policy: *"We want to use strong research outcomes from the project, to have strong evidence for policy influence"* (Plan International Vietnam).

For research partners, the research offers a means to achieve university goals of *"involvement and contribution in community initiatives."* Recognising funding constraints, researchers have reduced rates and provided in-kind resources to support the research. Researchers share similar interests to Plan International Australia and Plan International Vietnam and want the research to contribute to practical positive change.



Children are participating in Plan-supported early learning programs in Gia Lai province, Vietnam. Credit Monash University.

## Outcomes of the research

### Whilst only part way through, the research has already achieved numerous outcomes:

*Research findings have informed program adjustments and achievement of improved outcomes.*

Informed by the first year research findings, program activities were adjusted in a number of communes, which resulted in improved outcomes for children, as evidenced by the results of second year data.

*Contribution to stocks and flows of knowledge.*

Two journal papers have been written, informed by the research practice and inclusive of authorship from Plan International Vietnam staff. Mentoring local staff in journal publications was a key feature of the Monash research proposal (see further below).

*Influencing government policy in ECCD.*

A key intent of the research is to influence government policy and practice, already that is happening. Implementation started in seven communes, government leaders have since decided to replicate project components: from seven communes to now 200. Change has been influenced by participation of local partners in the research. The research is also described as convincing since *“it shows ownership of local people of the study, this is their own study. You can show to authorities, it’s not from Plan and not from outside”* (Plan International Vietnam).

*Learning for both development practitioners and researchers.*

The research has resulted in increased capacity of Plan International Vietnam and their partners in research processes. Similarly, international researchers have gained insights into ECCD in this unique context.

## The practice of partnership

### Key aspects of the research partnership are:

*The research agenda was defined by Plan International Australia.*

*“It’s kind of a luxury – money is always tight, you have to do it from the start to have enough money for research”* (Plan International Australia).

The research was proposed by Plan International Australia as part of a project proposal for NZAP funding. Plan established a Terms of Reference and Monash successfully responded to a Request for Proposals. A researcher from the University of Auckland was added to complement the group of researchers.

*The research approach of collaborative and mentoring practice was defined by the researchers and was in line with the development approach of Plan.*

Within their successful proposal, the researchers defined a collaborative practice of working with the local team in research design and development of the research tools and sought to mentor local staff in the preparation of academic papers.

*“They put it in as their approach – collaborative and mentoring. It wasn’t something that we put in the TOR but is something that we were looking for. We didn’t want it to be extractive, we wanted it to be about mentoring: we know things: how to work in context; they know things: how to do research. So we share knowledge”* (Plan International Australia).

*Ongoing and organic communication between research partners.*

Existing relationships between Plan International Australia and international researchers laid a foundation for the research. Plan International Australia provides a Brokers role between Plan International Vietnam and the research team and supports overall management of the activities. Similarly, Plan International Vietnam play an ‘in-between role’ between local and international researchers:

*“sometimes as coordinator, sometimes as translator”* (Plan International Vietnam).

Communications have been regular and all partners are 'cced' into emails, ensuring that everyone is up to date on progress. In the first instance, communication was remote and via skype. After the in-country training, communications are enabled through email and skype.

Managing expectations of different research partners is a key aspect of regular communications, as Plan International Vietnam and the research team sometimes have different expectations, for example timing of key deliverables.

*Knowing the context and ensuring a participatory process is key to ensuring tools are appropriate for people and place.*

*"Look, listen, be humble. You are there to learn in the first instance – otherwise what you have, can't be shared"* (Researcher).

The researchers started by getting to know the people and place of the research locations. Three days were spent in the remote communes, meeting with teachers, parents and children. Then another three days were spent with the research team to develop the research tools – this was critical to ensure the tools were fit-for-purpose and appropriate for local researchers and communities. The researchers described their role as facilitators of this process:

*"We have the knowledge of tools, you have knowledge of context. Our role was to be the facilitator, asking them to think about the tools in the local context, they are to develop their own tool"* (Researcher).

*Collaborative research is in line with interest of development impact and skill development of local staff and community.*

Collaborative research practice is valued by all the partners of this research. This is demonstrated by Plan International Vietnam and their partners taking an active role in the research design, development of research tools, data collection and analysis and mentoring local staff in the practice of research. Whilst recognising the value of 'stand-alone' researchers, this doesn't suit every context – and within this current research activity a collaborative approach is viewed as better.

*"This one is very different, collaboration and partnership, in that way this one is different; it's been successful, not only the research outcomes, but capacity in country and also policy perspective in country is important"* (Plan International Australia).

A key to this collaborative practice is recognising and valuing different types of power of the research partners, as noted by one international researcher:

*"The question is about how equal are partners– but what is the experience of each, appreciating each other's mutual expertise and finding a way to work together. All are different – all have different powers"* (Researcher).



Children attend a pre-school supported by the Plan project in Gia Lai. Credit: Monash University.



Plan's ECCD project has helped teachers and schools to improve the quality of the learning environment and interactions with children. Credit: Monash University.

Within the research, each partner has a clear role and leads different aspects of the research – from contract management; research set up and training of local researchers; coordination of data collection and collation; analysis and reporting back. All roles are critical and valued.

*Research rigour in data collection.*

Collaborative practice is not without its challenges. This research partnership has lived experience of a few of these: recruiting and training local researchers in complex concepts and research practices; ensuring ongoing availability of researchers, especially over multi-year period; and ensuring good data collection practices. As noted by Plan International Vietnam, issues have arisen and adjustments made along the way:

*“During the collection of data we found that some of them (local researchers) could not perform well, in that case – we discussed with the research assistant team how to address. We asked them to share experiences of how to perform well, and to set up a back-up plan within the team. If one person was not doing the job well how to respond to this”*  
(Plan International Vietnam).

Connecting data collection to collation and analysis is a key part of the research process and a learning from the research has been to review data collection in real time. Again, as noted by Plan International Vietnam:

*“We need some review of the data as they are collecting it so that they can improve the ongoing data collection process – rather than only finding out at the end that the data is not good”*  
(Plan International Vietnam).

*Building in multiple avenues for communicating research findings and ensuring contribution back to partners and communities where the research happens.*

The research design includes multiple platforms for communicating research findings including to research partners and communities where the research was carried out. Already, two journal publications have been prepared providing knowledge to the broader sector. Contribution to local programming and policy influence within Vietnam is also a high priority for research partners. Plan International Vietnam have translated the first-year research findings into Vietnamese to share with local stakeholders and will do so for future reports. The researchers, working with Plan International Vietnam, are also planning to develop a process for, and version of the reports that are ‘child friendly’ so that findings can be shared with and validated by children and communities. Sharing back research findings is intended to empower communities, informed by the knowledge of what they have been doing to support ECCD.

*Flexibility to weave in a research project within the variety of other competing demands.*

All the research partners are managing multiple projects and fitting the research within existing and full workloads. Flexibility was described as a key attribute of the research as plans shift and timelines get extended.

## Advice from the experienced

**Informed by their research partnership experience, here are a few words of advice from the research team:**

- ▶ Include research within a project proposal as a way to get funding for research in resource scarce environments
- ▶ Tick the boxes to ensure you have a Terms of Reference and establish all the contractual arrangements, but also have a sense of partnership and collaboration. Shared understanding of what you want to achieve, shared understanding of ways of working and everyone's expectations need to be understood
- ▶ Ensure you have open channels of communication within and across all partners and ensure focal points are known to all partners
- ▶ Plans will change, especially over a multi-year project – be flexible and adapt. Be open to organic practices but also write key things down so that key decisions can be captured and communicated to everyone
- ▶ Ensure there is budget and take the time for researchers to be in-country to learn about the context
- ▶ Don't get lost in translation! Technical concepts and terms can easily get lost – especially when working through multiple translation to local dialects. Ensure you have professional and quality translation
- ▶ Tweak your formal ethics practice to the local context and ensure it's relevant to the local researchers and can be carried out easily
- ▶ Listen and learn from each other, respecting the mutual contribution of each partner

## Insights and lessons learned on research in-country

- ▶ Ensure the researchers know the local context, “so that they can provide practical and useful recommendations”
- ▶ Training local researchers involves more than a once-off training – coaching and mentoring is just as important as training
- ▶ Within a multi-year research project, ensure you have a back-up plan to deal with turnover of your trained local researchers
- ▶ To strengthen data collection – link local researcher knowledge about data collection to analysis and the overall research design
- ▶ Conduct your research training and then get out and use it! – before people forget what you have taught them – and before they get busy doing other things or move away

## Journal publications related to the research

Fleer, Marilyn; Hedges, Helen; Fleer-Stout, Freya & Hanh, Le Thi Bich (2016): *Researcher inter subjectivity: a methodology for jointly building an interactive electronic early childhood quality involvement/rating scale*, International Journal of Research & Method in Education, DOI: 10.1080/1743727X.2016.1219982

Hedges, Helen; Fleer, Marilyn; Fleer-Stout, Freya; Hanh, Le Thi Bich (2016): *Aspiring to Quality Teacher-Parent Partnerships in Vietnam: Building Localised Funds of Knowledge*, International Research in Early Childhood Education, v7 n3 p49-68