

Aspiring to quality teacher–parent partnerships in Vietnam: Building localised funds of knowledge

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Abstract

Collaborative and reciprocal teacher–parent partnerships have been established in prior research as vital in empowering ethnic-minority children to be competent learners who value their home background, culture, and language and also learn the language used by teachers as the medium of education. Such collaborative relationships may be challenging to imagine and achieve in countries that have complex political, cultural, social, and economic histories. This paper demonstrates, through a case study in Vietnam, how partnership relationships might be reconceptualised. The research team, comprising both international and local researchers, sought to collectively identify teacher–parent partnership practices that foregrounded local funds of knowledge, and generated a zone of potential development for dialogue about quality practices for teacher–parent partnerships. Through a transformative collaborative workshop process, a tool for aspiring towards quality teacher–parent partnerships was developed. Drawing upon cultural-historical theory, the paper argues that the tool captured the dialectical relations between everyday concepts from practice and academic concepts of quality from the literature (Vygotsky, 1987). These concepts challenged teachers’ beliefs and assumptions about families’ backgrounds and knowledges, thus enabling teachers to consider more reciprocal relationships and build greater insights into the existing funds of knowledge held by families and communities than previously.

Keywords

Quality scale; teacher–parent partnerships; funds of knowledge; culturally-responsive pedagogy; Vietnam; ethnic minorities

Introduction

International concerns focused on children's academic achievements and consequent life chances, particularly through comparisons in international test results between countries (e.g., Organisation for Economic and Co-operative Development [OECD], 2010), lead to anxieties about the quality of educational programmes. Many governments have invested recently in early childhood education as one response to improving children's educational outcomes and life chances (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2012; Fleer, Hedegaard, & Tudge, 2009; OECD, 2004, 2015). Considerations of quality early childhood education have therefore become a focus for improving experiences and outcomes, and to argue that educational investment has social and economic benefits. A prominent tool used to measure quality in early childhood settings internationally is the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS) (Harms & Clifford, 1980; Harms, Clifford, & Cryer, 2005). Country-specific versions of ECERS, studies of quality in the Asian region, and evaluations of these, including from educators' perspectives, are relatively recent, for example, in China (Hu, Vong, Chen, & Li, 2015; Hu, Vong, & Mak, 2015; Li, Hu, Pan, Qin, & Fan, 2014) and Singapore (Lim-Ratnam, 2013).

Within these studies and tools related to quality early childhood education, little attention has been paid to the experiences of ethnic-minority emerging-bilingual children. In particular for these children, the quality of the teacher–parent partnerships, shared understandings and aspirations, and contributions and expectations might be significant enablers or constraints in advancing children's educational success (Cottle & Alexander, 2014). This paper reports on an early outcome of the experiences of emerging bilingual Bah'nar ethnic minority children who learn in Vietnamese-medium settings in Gia Lai, Vietnam. As part of a wider mixed-methods study in progress, the authors developed a quality scale for early childhood education (3–8 years), traversing both preschools and early-primary classrooms, with local teachers, principals, and community programmes' staff.

Fieldwork in this remote provincial part of Vietnam encompassed observations and focus groups with teachers, principals, and community playgroup members (collectively called educators in this paper). Findings indicated that there was little parent knowledge of, or teacher information sharing about, learning and education. The research team and educators made a joint decision to write a statement about teacher–parent partnerships for the quality scale. Unsurprisingly, constructing indicators for this aspect proved challenging. The paper argues that using funds of knowledge (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005) as a theoretical, methodological, and pedagogical framing for future work in Gia Lai might empower children to participate and achieve more successfully in the future.

Quality early childhood education: Contestable views

Educational statistics internationally suggest that around 20% of learners are achieving below expected standards and that these learners often represent ethnic minorities (OECD, 2010). Hence, much attention in recent times has been taken up with attempts to develop culturally responsive pedagogies to provide quality education and enhance children's achievement.

What constitutes quality education globally has become highly contestable (Fenech, Sweller, & Harrison, 2010) and in need of advocacy (Jalongo et al., 2004). A well-known and widely used tool for assessing quality internationally is the ECERS (ECERS-R for the revised version; Harms & Clifford, 1980; Harms et al., 2005). The scale has undergone several iterations and updates. Various critiques of ECERS have been made; specifically, that the ECERS emphasises the

equipment and resources of the physical environment rather than the quality and responsiveness of teaching interactions, and that it reflects Western values about what constitutes quality (Cassidy, Hestenes, Hegde, & Mims, 2005; Fenech, 2011; Fenech et al., 2010; Sakai, Whitebook, Wishard, & Howes, 2003). While structural indicators such as group size, teacher–child ratios, and teacher qualifications may be able to be agreed on, less tangible process-quality indicators, such as the quality of teacher–child or teacher–parent relationships may be more difficult to assess. These involve judgements of cultural matters such as understanding of background contexts, warmth, communication styles, and responsiveness.

Within the literature on quality, partnerships with families are highlighted as central to maximising children’s learning (Smith, Grima, Gaffney, & Powell, 2000). By knowing families and communities well, teachers can build understandings of ways to develop educational programmes that promote children’s learning, languages, identities, and culture (Podmore, Hedges, Keegan, & Harvey, 2016). Teacher–parent partnerships that take account of parents’ social and cultural capital (Marjoribanks, 2005; Schlee, Mullis, & Shriner, 2009) may be particularly important in considerations of ways to address achievement lags common in countries with ethnic minorities. Research evidence also identifies that when parents are involved in their children’s education, outcomes for children in both education and life more generally are improved (Biddulph, Biddulph, & Biddulph, 2003).

There has been some development of ECERS-inspired quality-rating scales in Asia (Li et al., 2014; Lim-Ratnam, 2013). However, there may be major tensions associated with adopting the ECERS into non-Western contexts without consideration of local conditions (Fenech, 2011; Rosenthal, 2003) and the buy-in of local teachers (Lim-Ratnam, 2013). Hence the development of some scales might draw on the original ECERS scale to greater or lesser degrees. For example, while “importing” Western ideas, values, and perspectives seems inappropriate, the underlying academic knowledge might be drawn on by researchers to assist local teachers to understand and debate possibilities. In addition, the ECERS and its derivatives have largely been used as an evaluation tool rather than for self-review or professional development (Mathers, Linskey, Seddon, & Sylva, 2007). Use for self-review or professional development might empower local teachers and communities to consider their environments and practices in culturally responsive ways.

Another way to approach the development of rating scales, then, might be to create a scale from a “ground-up” and collaborative perspective. Such an approach can draw on, appreciate, and respect the local knowledge and cultural practices and values of the groups for which the scale is being developed, while still finding a place for other academic knowledge and experience to be shared and considered. This approach was used in the development of a rating scale for Gia Lai, Vietnam (Fleer, Hedges, Fleer-Stout, & Le Thi Bich, 2016). However, where local practices are not yet in keeping with the resulting indicators, a scale may also be aspirational and operate as a self-review tool to work towards for the future. This paper reports on the experiences of developing indicators for teacher–parent partnerships, and ways educators and researchers approached describing and exemplifying high quality as a tool for ongoing professional attention when there was little existing evidence in current practices. The history and culture of Vietnam, current social and economic conditions, and the wider intervention programme this project seeks to develop research tools to evaluate, are reviewed next to provide a rationale and context for this approach.

Context of the study

Vietnam is a country with a fraught political history. While economic progress has occurred over the past 20 years, challenges remain for ethnic minorities: inequalities in income, access to quality nutrition, safe drinking water, education, and health care (Baulch, Chuyen, Haughton, & Haughton, 2007). As such, expansion of early child development services within disadvantaged areas has been a strong recent priority of the Vietnamese government. The Gia Lai province is in the central highland area and was the centre of the Vietnamese war conflict. Almost half of the population is comprised of two ethnic minorities—J'rai and Bah'nar—and the majority ethnic group is Kinh. The briefing papers for the present study reported a lack of understanding and practices by parents, families, teachers, managers, and communities about quality childcare and development. Another issue reported was low levels of participation and engagement by parents in schools.

Plan Vietnam selected seven communes within the Bah'nar ethnic community in Gia Lai for an intervention programme from 2012–2017. The programme aims to improve the quality of education across preschools and primary classroom for children aged 3–8 years. In these settings, teachers speak Vietnamese as it is the medium of instruction, and children learn Vietnamese as the language of education, understanding it as the language that will improve their life chances. Few teachers speak Bah'nar and few parents speak Vietnamese. Hence, children are attempting to become bilingual, negotiating between the adults in their lives. In this way, children have some responsibility and agency; for example, older children act as translators for meetings between teachers and parents.

Little emphasis was placed on teacher–parent partnerships in the design of the intervention programme. Instead, a focus on parent education and increasing the knowledge—and improving the practices—of families was emphasised. Teachers have held this kind of privileged position in many communities. The research team noted that this conceptualisation had not been problematised in the intervention project, for example, that families might have equivalent expertise. As part of the first phase of a mixed-methods research project to develop tools to evaluate the intervention, the research team developed a quality scale. During the workshop that took place during this development process, the authors raised the importance of collaborative teacher–parent partnerships. This emphasis was vital to the authors to work towards achieving the programme's goals and for considering a focus on future actions to empower parents and teachers to improve children's outcomes.

Cultural-historical theory

Cultural-historical theories underpinned the present study (González et al., 2005; Vygotsky, 1987, 1997). A cultural-historical approach to research seeks to capture holistically both the context and the process for realising the goals of the research (Vygotsky, 1997). Concepts consistent with cultural-historical theories allowed a comprehensive analysis of the two-tiered dynamics that represented the relations between the international researchers and the workshop participants for realising aspirations for quality teacher–parent partnerships. Three concepts are prominent in conceptualising this paper.

Zone of proximal development

Vygotsky's (1998) conception of the zone of proximal development is key for explaining the development that could be realised through the development of a tool to build quality teacher–parent partnerships. When teachers become oriented to new understandings they are reaching forward to the next period of development that the tool has made visible, a zone of *potential* development. This zone is where the teachers' motive orientation for quality outcomes for children may change their thinking and hence their practices. Learning within the zone of proximal development takes place when the learning then orients participants to new practices (Hedegaard & Flear, 2013).

Everyday and scientific concept formation

The relational concept of everyday and scientific concept formation was first introduced by Vygotsky (1987) to help explain how children enact everyday understandings of practices in their lives (e.g., putting on a jumper to keep warm) where they may not consciously consider the scientific concept (e.g., insulation). Vygotsky's theory drew our attention to the relations between these two concepts, in stating that new understandings and practices can emerge when people work towards conscious understandings of everyday knowledge and practices. In this study, this relational concept means that both local (everyday) concepts and concepts from the literature about quality could inform teachers' understandings and practices.

In short, teachers could work towards consciously considering and using *both* sets of concepts for thinking and making choices about practices. In the context of partnerships, for example, a teacher might better understand the valued everyday practice of a child in their community when they bring to bear a scientific concept relevant to the particular cultural practice or language dialect used by the family.

Funds of knowledge

The concept of funds of knowledge (Gonzalez et al., 2005) makes visible respecting localised understandings of cultural knowledge and practices. Funds of knowledge is a concept that was derived from research within Mexican-American and Latino bilingual and biliterate communities in Tucson, Arizona, USA. It aimed to redress deficit views of children as learners whose educational problems lay with diminished home experiences. Instead, it foregrounds the rich cultural knowledge and lived experiences that families have that teachers can draw on in educational settings to enhance student learning.

Together, these cultural-historical theoretical concepts guided approaches and concepts selected to frame the scale development. They also guided the interpretation of the process that occurred during the collaboration between local educators and international researchers.

Methods

An Australian and New Zealand research team was awarded the contract to create research tools to evaluate the progress of the quality education initiatives in Gia Lai. The overall research project aims to identify progress in children's cognitive, language, social and emotional development, and school readiness, using different tools over three years. This first phase was an interpretivist study, designed to observe and experience some aspects of the realities of people's

everyday lives. This paper reports on the first tool developed—a quality scale—and responds to the research questions that follow:

- What might constitute evidence of quality early childhood education for ethnic minority children in Gia Lai?
- How might a contextually appropriate quality scale for early childhood education in Vietnam be developed?

The political history and the socioeconomic conditions of the area mean that few tourists visit Gia Lai. The first three authors' visit in December 2014 required delicate negotiations and permissions between Plan Vietnam and local education officials. To develop an understanding of the context that teachers and community educational leaders and staff were working in, the authors obtained a work visa to enter the country and visit communes in the K'Bang and To Tung districts in Gia Lai. Two local education officials accompanied the research team on the field trip. The team was supported by local Plan Vietnam staff, including translators for these English-speaking researchers. Ethical approvals for this part of the research were obtained in ways appropriate to the institution leading the study and in situ in ways responsive to local community languages, protocols, and expectations (Fleer et al., 2016).

The following data gathering methods were consistent with the cultural-historical framings of the project as they sought to understand the context of the educators and children in the project in ways that respected their history, politics, and culture. The methods then drew on the concepts of zone of proximal development, everyday and scientific concept formation, and funds of knowledge, in developing the quality scale collaboratively with respect for local knowledge and practices.

The field visits developed an understanding of the contexts of preschools and primary schools. In each district we undertook observations in “satellite” preschools and schools—which catered largely for the minority Bah'nar children—and “main” schools—the larger institutions for greater numbers of children, mostly from the dominant Kinh ethnic group, than the satellite settings. Teacher-child ratios in these settings were similar, around 1:15, including a mixed-grade classroom in one satellite primary school. We entered each setting respectfully, trying to create as little impact as possible on the teaching and learning programme. However, the arrival of 10 visiting adults, including three foreigners, was not usual and we accept that some of the situations we observed were likely to have been somewhat contrived. At one satellite primary school, we observed, in the playground, children playing, talking, and eating together. We recorded these activities with two video cameras.

A translator provided translations of speech into English into an attached microphone simultaneously with the recording. Listening to the translator as the activities occurred, and reviewing the video footage, assisted our understanding of events in order to write field notes. We used these data sources to make sense of, and later analyse, the events and interactions.

We also observed an after-school community play and reading group, held in the late afternoon once a month for children aged 4–11. This group was run by one teacher and two volunteers. The purpose of this group was to offer children opportunities to read books individually, in pairs of an older and younger child, and to have books read in small groups by an adult. Play materials were also provided for part of the session and a few parents who had brought infants along with their older children assisted with supervising this play in one corner of the room.

We held four separate focus group meetings with 1) preschool teachers, 2) primary teachers, 3) parents and other family and community members, and 4) community playgroup leaders in order to explore their perspectives of quality and the rationale for the programmes they offered. We were provided with information about the community's goals, beliefs, expectations, and aspirations. We also asked about what we had observed in the field visits to gain further insight into cultural-historical beliefs and practices. These meetings were also video-recorded with a translator providing simultaneous translation.

After two days of intensive fieldwork, a three-day workshop held in Pleiku followed to develop a quality-rating scale to be used in the seven communes in Gia Lai. Thirty-eight educators attended, comprising teachers, principals, and community playgroup staff. We adapted planned approaches to developing the quality scale flexibly, particularly given that we were working through translators (Fleer et al., 2016).

Detail of the participants and the total data gathered through these methods is brought together in table 1.

Table 1

Summary of data gathered

Participants and settings	Methods	Data generated
<i>Field trip to K'Bang and To Tung</i>		
2 satellite schools, 2 main schools (74 children, 6 teachers, 2 support staff; 56 children in transition)	Video and photo documentation	4.5 hours of video and corresponding field notes, 501 photos
1 playgroup/community reading group (74 students, 1 teacher, 2 Plan volunteers)		
<i>Focus groups</i>		
56 teachers and community leaders in 4 different groups	Interviews, video documentation	2.5 hours of video and corresponding field notes
<i>Workshop</i>		
38 teachers, principals and community leaders from 7 communes and 4 districts	Video and photo documentation provided by the participants. Selected field trip items	PowerPoints including 38 photos and 5 hours of video from participants; 4.5 hours of video, field notes, 201 photos from researchers

The outline of the methods provided and the summary of data gathered illustrates efforts to obtain robust and trustworthy data. Validity in this project was achieved in multiple ways: the topic was significant and worthy of investigation; there was a large quantity of rich data gathered; theoretical constructs were used to analyse these data; and resonance and transferability were goals achieved through use of the workshop (Tracy, 2010).

Preliminary informal and intuitive analysis of the fieldwork and the first day of workshop data was conducted nightly by the research team. Intuition and intuitive inquiry are strong forms of everyday knowledge grounded in academic and professional knowledge (Hodgkinson, Langan-Fox, & Sadler-Smith, 2008; Saldaña, 2015). Given timing constraints of the visit and the task to be achieved, a more rigorous analysis was not possible at that time. We perceived a strong

disconnect and lack of shared understandings amongst teachers, principals, parents, and community members. This was considered alongside the willingness we had observed and heard about from teachers and principals to implement aspects of the intervention programme to benefit minority ethnic children, and the enthusiastic involvement of parents and families in our visits and meetings.

We considered that we had sufficient evidence and justification to add an additional element to the quality scale planned and developed on day two of the workshop: a statement about teacher–parent partnerships. Workshop participants agreed this would be useful for problematising the relationship and for continued efforts to improve these relationships. They made the ultimate decision that this was an aspirational statement, one to encourage working towards collaborative partnerships, not an equivalent evaluative element of the quality scale to other elements developed: language and literacy, child friendly environments, child centered practices, adapting teaching methods, and stimulating learning environments. The following reports findings from the fieldwork and the experience of constructing the teacher–parents partnership statement.

Findings

The findings here first report on observations related to the educational programmes and promising signs of teacher knowledge that respond to research question one: locating evidence of quality early childhood education for ethnic minority children. Selected comments from teachers, leaders, community and family members at the focus groups are offered here, centring on matters related to the partnerships between teachers and families. The first research question can be answered with more rigour in the future after the quality scale has been applied and amended by teachers and researchers in the actual educational contexts. We then describe the development of the quality scale related to partnerships as a specific response to research question two. Some findings are reported through the words of the translators who accompanied the research team on the project. These findings illustrate the ways that the workshop enabled dialogue about how parents and families were positioned, and ways this positioning might be strengthened to broaden understandings of expertise and enact reciprocal partnerships.

Observations of teacher–parent partnership practices

The existing relationships between teachers and parents appeared respectful. Nevertheless, the traditional and cultural reverence of teachers, and teachers’ deficit views of families, created tensions. Arrival and departure routines afforded no space for formal or informal teacher–parent communications. Children were left and collected in the playground at the preschools and at the gate of the primary school. Children attending preschools and junior primary schools experienced a mix of play, small-group sessions, and whole-group teaching, commonly focused on language, literacy, and numeracy, for approximately half an hour at a time. However, these practices and outcomes were rarely discussed with parents.

At the families’ focus group, family members noted they enjoyed preparing resources but seldom saw what happened with these. Parents were asked to supply labour, for example, to add playground facilities or to prepare, serve, and maintain the on-site lunch facilities at the main primary school. Some also reported helping teachers learn a few words in Bah’nar to help children settle into the more formal educational settings. They reported that they were never invited into preschools or classrooms to observe or provide parent help. Several commented that they relied on their children to self-report their learning experiences.

This lack of educational connection was also clear in other responses at the teacher meetings. While in keeping with the wider integrated health and education initiatives, teacher comments focused on the need for families and children to learn hygiene practices. Further, deficit views of families were expressed at the preschool teachers' meeting. One teacher noted:

I think that the reading culture is kind of limited, even in the Kinh majority, so the problem probably is even more so with the ethnic minorities.

Similarly, deficit views of children as learners were also prevalent in responses from some primary teachers:

especially for the ethnic minority population due to their limited Vietnamese capacity so they have more sessions of the [rote learning] pronunciation that you saw this morning, but . . . [teachers] make sure there will be one game in each session [to] encourage those students to learn more

However, this example also illustrates that teachers were trying to implement child-centred approaches by incorporating playful ways to progress children's education.

At the community play and reading group held in a local building, parents and other community adults and children usually talked and played outside the building. However, their curiosity about the research team was piqued. After an hour, the research team invited the adults in to show them recordings of their children's activities on an iPad. They were delighted and proud to see evidence of their children's reading and play. One grandmother explained how she made resources for the group to ensure that children's Bah'nar background was represented and included.

At the subsequent meeting some limitations related to professional knowledge were expressed about this community initiative. The translator reported a playgroup community representative as saying:

She would like to see more outdoor activities and . . . outdoor space for them to have the playgroup and also some more space to play even inside when the weather's not good.

In addition, one of the untrained volunteers recognised the limits of her knowledge and experience:

So she's saying that since she's very young she doesn't have much experience [like] being a mother so she would like to see more of the materials that would help her ... and learn how they can take care of their [children] at home.

Evidence of teachers' partnership efforts

There were some promising signs, though, that the intervention programme was having an influence on teachers' efforts to improve their understandings of children, parents, families, and the Bah'nar language and culture, and implement child-centred education.

One primary school teacher reported that during specific times with her class she used the Bah'nar language to assist understandings of stories.

[T]he way that she teaches them is that she combines the local language with the Vietnamese and so . . . for some expression, or for some conversation, she also use the Bah'nar language and then translates into Vietnamese, [to locate] something that relates to the students and also [encourage them to] feel more motivated to learn Vietnamese.

Use of Bah'nar language, local stories, and resources was also gradually increasing in primary schools and the community group. In the monthly community play and reading group, there had been some attempt to redress a gap in access to books and toys. The books available were written in Vietnamese, and were often translations of stories and fairy tales from Western settings. Plan Vietnam was in the process of making books, written in Bah'nar, from the stories families tell their children in these communities. There was also growing use of local resources and materials in primary schools, and acknowledgment that families helped to make resources at special times of the year, such as cultural and religious festivals. One principal also said she drew on local parents to translate words between Bah'nar and Vietnamese to support teachers to help children transition to school.

There were also encouraging signals that some teachers' consciousness had been raised about the potential of engaging with the families and local community resources. One satellite preschool teacher reported that:

The way they approach the ethnic culture is that they go into their village and ask the people there or they ask the children if they have anything interesting related to their culture that they can bring to class so that they can share and learn together.

This teacher had gathered leaves from local trees to use as a teaching resource, observed in a number of ways—for literacy and communication, numeracy, and artwork—during the fieldwork visit.

A primary school deputy principal who was very keen to ensure curriculum was relevant to the children at the school noted that:

The topic is usually something that's not very relevant to the child, for example it could be Ho Chi Minh City or the country in general so it's something they find hard to relate [to] themselves. But now with the new curriculum they're kind of changing the way ... [they use] something they see in everyday . . . the activities that they implement with children it is something that the children they know already and they can find, really relate it to their lives. And also through talking to the children every day they also learn some local language by themselves and . . . apply that to . . . teaching the children . . . that [is] more relevant.

These findings suggested that this partnership element warranted deeper attention to continue these positive steps and strengthen partnerships. In these ways, the research team began to consider the concept of funds of knowledge (Gonzalez et al., 2005) as potential for a culturally responsive pedagogical approach for consideration in the project. With regard to a funds of knowledge methodology (home visits), and the potential for teacher learning and curriculum provision (see Hensley, 2005), one teacher mentioned that she visited family homes at the meeting with the preschool teachers:

So whenever they visit a child they also ask about their parents' business, you know, what they're planting right now, what the season is and they're really concerned about the financial condition of the family because that's something that really relate directly to the child's development.

The research team asked the primary school teachers if they visited family homes. One teacher responded:

So every satellite school the teachers visit their home more often because their parents are from the ethnic minority and they have the limited knowledge of education for early childhood, and so they visit regularly to talk to the parents and then remind them to dress them warmly in the winter, or you know, to take them to school every day. But for the main school it's less frequent, but whenever a child is sick or they cannot come to school, then the teacher visit the home directly and to ask the reason why they didn't send their child to school.

It became clear through these responses from both groups of teachers that visits to family homes were a monitoring and accountability mechanism to check on children's attendance, any health related issues, and the families' living conditions and practices. They were not used as a genuine effort to learn about and appreciate children's everyday lives and family and community experiences or perhaps learn a few words in Bah'nar.

Constructing the parent–teacher partnership quality indicators

In the ground-up process of developing the five-point scale of quality education in Gia Lai, three elements and the associated indicators had already begun to be developed by the time the partnership notion became a focus of the workshop. Hence, some shared understandings, ways of working, trust and rapport had already been developed between the research team and the workshop participants: principals and teachers from preschools and primary schools, and community playgroup staff, as representatives of all seven communes involved. It was the only element where the research team provided overt challenge and critique to the participants, and offered significant input from international research, while attempting to remain respectful of local values.

The research team shared and reflected on the findings noted in this paper with the workshop participants. As these findings were discussed and debated, the educators collectively realised partnership was a dimension of quality they had not yet explored rigorously. Potential indicators for a statement were brainstormed and debated in similar ways to the elements that had already been developed in line with Plan's interventions (reading and language development, child-friendly environments, child-centred practices, and adapting teaching methods).

While the community-play and reading-group representatives were able to describe ways they both currently experienced and would aspire to achieve respectful and reciprocal relationships with families, the preschool and school teachers and principals were less able to imagine this. The traditional cultural value of revering teachers meant that all parties had expectations that teachers were experts. Families were positioned in a somewhat deficit manner in the ways they contributed and they knew little about what their children experienced. Yet dialogue revealed that teachers and principals were keen to redress and counteract these deficit views. They also seemed to realise that the intervention programme's aims might be better achieved when teachers worked alongside families to positively engage them and their children.

Quality indicators for partnerships with families were then reviewed and rewritten to include more meaningful items than presently occurring. During this process there was agreement that there was likely little presently occurring above level 2 indicators (minimum standards of quality) on the five-point scale developed. This was reinforced when the workshop groups could locate few photos or videos to illustrate higher levels of this indicator on the scale. The resulting teacher–parent partnerships statements (see Appendix) in Gia Lai at that point, were viewed as aspirational. The statements were developed for each setting to take away to contextualise and use with their constituencies as an improvement-oriented tool for self-review and professional learning about quality education, a very different purpose to prior quality scales developed internationally.

Discussion

This section relates the development of the teacher–parent partnerships statement to the cultural-historical theoretical premises underpinning this paper. The concept of funds of knowledge encourages exploration of families’ cultural knowledge and experiences that might be utilised in educational settings to enhance student learning. The relational concept of everyday and scientific concept formation, in the context of valuing families’ funds of knowledge as a zone of proximal and potential development, gave greater insights into the findings of the study.

First, as the researchers respectfully introduced some ideas about partnership from research literature, there was much enthusiastic debate amongst educators. As the indicators progressed and discussion became even more animated, the impetus for parents to initiate and take responsibility for the partnership shifted to the teachers taking responsibility. A zone of proximal development enabled the researchers to lead the participants from understandings of their everyday concepts of practice and engage with scientific concepts from the research on quality early childhood education.

In this way, a zone of potential development was created. There was a transformational realisation as educators came to understand research evidence that warmer relationships initiated by teachers could enhance children’s experiences, success, and outcomes. There was also quite a ground-breaking shift in educator thinking from their position as authority figures in education, to viewing families more positively in terms of the contributions they might make to supporting children’s education in more than practical and behavioural support ways. Finally, there was some argument about what was practical, as opposed to aspirational, for partnerships, and requiring advocacy, in this specific Vietnamese context.

Further, for quality education, it is important that teachers value and support the cultural and social diversity of parents and families, have a commitment to effective communication, and envisage themselves as learners (Baum & Swick, 2008). These features are present in the intent of the concept of funds of knowledge.

The methodology of the original funds of knowledge project—and some that have followed it—was teachers visiting family homes positioned as learners, not experts, to glean knowledge of children’s participation in everyday practices. They also gained a newfound respect for families and their skills and expertise. Through these visits, teacher empathy grew and partnerships were strengthened. In this way, teacher assumptions were redressed and the funds of knowledge resources of the families drawn on in the educational setting (Cooper & Hedges, 2014; Hensley,

2005; Tenery, 2005; Whyte & Karabon, 2016). In the case of Gia Lai, teacher visits to families as learners rather than authorities would similarly enable them to learn about the considerable expertise and resources these families have. It may also disrupt cultural beliefs about the positioning of teachers as authorities in positive ways that enabled the more collaborative, mutually respectful, aspirational indicators at higher levels of the scale to develop.

As a pedagogical tool, funds of knowledge would also involve families in educational settings beyond the provision of a few resources and translating a few words, to contributing expertise inside classrooms, thereby learning more about what children do each day and subsequently perhaps be able to support that learning. Moreover, children would see improved relationships between these important adults in their lives to the benefit of their self-esteem, positive view of self as learner, and hence their learning and achievement too (Cooper & Hedges, 2014). Internationally, such moves would support the global trend in an increasingly diverse world of understanding the rich benefits of bilingualism where languages become a cognitive resource, not just a medium for learning (Podmore et al., 2016).

In short, funds of knowledge as a concept might be valuable in Gia Lai, firstly to explore the cultural knowledge and practices of the Bah'nar minority families in the province, and secondly to more evenly balance the partnership relationship and provide opportunities for parents to participate more directly in educational settings. Funds of knowledge involves teachers valuing everyday knowledge and practices, visiting family homes, and utilising the expertise located in educational settings, thus developing new scientific concepts about local cultural practices. These practices and concepts were reflected in the partnership tool, where gradations of quality practice were made visible, thus capturing zones of potential development. Future iterations of the quality scale in Gia Lai might also take into account parents' views in efforts to define and assess quality (Hennessy & Delaney, 1999; Rentzou, 2012).

Conclusion

Within bilingual communities, positive relationships between teachers and parents may be particularly vital in supporting children to become successful learners. Within the complex political, cultural, social, and economic history of Vietnam, it may be challenging to achieve positive partnerships. This paper has reported on one aspect of a research project in Gia Lai, a rural province in Vietnam, to develop research tools for evaluating the government initiatives that are in place for improving the quality of children's education. We have described the development of indicators for a statement called "creating partnerships with families" alongside a ground-up, contextually sensitive quality environment rating scale. In contrast to the more evaluative, performative aims and goals of previous international use of the ECERS, teachers, principals, and community playgroup staff agreed that these indicators were aspirational and would require professional learning and advocacy to achieve. We argue that funds of knowledge, the relations between everyday and scientific concept formation, and zone of proximal/potential development provide a framing for conceptualising these shifts, leading to more reciprocal and responsive teacher-parent partnerships that would benefit minority children's learning and future life achievements in Vietnam.

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Appendix: Creating partnerships with families

These indicators were developed collaboratively between the research team and the local educators. The wording used is the translators' efforts to express the ideas from Vietnamese to English. It is reported with some lexical and grammatical corrections only. We have not adjusted for our interpretation of meaning as a way to indicate the kinds of beliefs, attitudes, ideas, and practices that might be part of future teacher professional learning and development in Plan Vietnam's ongoing programme.

Creating partnerships with families

Indicator 1 There is no private place to meet each parent at school.

Parents are still afraid of talking with teachers.

Parents have still not co-operated with teachers in child management at home and at school.

Parents don't take children to school and pick them up, due to being busy with agricultural work.

Parents have not actively met teachers to discuss matters related to their children's education.

Partnership between teachers and parents is not enhanced.

Pre-school: Parents take children to school and pick them up; however, teacher does not deeply find out children's circumstances.

Community: There is no cooperation between family and school.
School: Parents do not pay attention to their children's studying at school.

Indicator 2 There are few meetings between parents and teachers/school to discuss their children's studying.

Teachers meet parents, but not often, only [about children who are] absent or [with] unfinished homework.

There is cooperation between school and family in class work (cleaning up, building fence and school yard...)

There is discussion between parents and teachers but without cooperation.

Preschool: teacher visits children's house to mobilize them to come to school.

School/teacher pays attention to communication activities with parents such as: take children to school and pick them up, studying hygiene and children's development.

	<p>Teacher joins in village meeting to find out parents' situation and thoughts.</p> <p>Community: organizing communications activities combined with village/women/club/Plan [Vietnam – intervention programme] group meeting to let parent understand the importance of children's education.</p>
Indicator 3	<p>There is cooperation between family and school, but not effective yet.</p> <p>Parents are willing to cooperate with teacher when some matters/problems happen to children.</p> <p>Parents and teacher together make study facilities and toys for their children.</p> <p>School holds parents' meeting and sets up communications board [about early childhood care and development].</p> <p>After understanding the important role of studying, parents will meet/discuss with school through parents meeting and school activities.</p> <p>Parents encourage their children to study and actively participate in extra activities, such as: dancing and singing, extra/outdoor activities and tell their children some good examples of studying to follow.</p>
Indicator 4	<p>Most parents prepare study [equipment] for children: book/notebook/pen/ruler/backpack.</p> <p>Most parents participate in parents meeting organized by school.</p> <p>Parents often communicate with teachers/school about their children's studying results at school/at home/in community activities.</p> <p>Some parents are willing to support school in fixing school infrastructure/facilities.</p> <p>Family and school/teacher cooperate with each other to solve difficulties/problems happening to children.</p> <p>Parents cooperate with school in children's studying as well as contribute their labour/fund to organize school activities.</p> <p>Parents actively cooperate with school to get the information [about] absent students.</p> <p>Parents mobilize parents/ socialize education to parents from supporting their labour in cleaning activities at school to contributing studying materials for children.</p>
Indicator 5	<p>There is active cooperation/sharing between teachers and parents in children's studying (contributing labour and funds).</p>

Parents are willing to take their children to school, participate in extra activities, e.g., dancing and singing, and good hand-writing competition.

Children love school, and are interested in studying thanks to parents' and teachers' caring, encouragement and stimulation.

There is a tight and close cooperation among school, teacher and parents.

Parents actively cooperate with teacher to evaluate students.

There are a lot of available local studying materials/toys for children to experience.

Parents actively participate in education activities, such as: contributing studying materials and help their children to be confident for comprehensive development.

There is tight cooperation among community, parents and school.

[Teachers are] close and friendly with children.

Have created a good mental and physical environment.
