

THE COMMUNITY SCHOOL IN VIETNAM

by Robert Mathias

"My friend Le Chu-Tich, now 50 years old, was one of the first pupils in his village school. His teacher taught him the difference between pure and polluted water... Le Chu-Tich, then aged 10, learned that drinking water had to be boiled because pond water contained many dangerous microbes. In his neat handwriting, he carefully copied out the lesson the teacher had written on the blackboard, and I am sure that the next day he was able to recite his lesson without forgetting a single came. Thanks to his schooling, Le Chu-Tich knows that there are microbes. But he doesn't really believe in them. On the contrary, he thinks that pond water can be good when it tastes sweet. None of the villagers have ever attributed to the water they drink the origin of such widespread diseases as amoebic dysentery, infant diarrhoea or the many gastrointestinal infections. Yet in humid, tropical areas, 30 to 60 per cent of deaths among children are caused by polluted water..."

This story, from a report by Marcel de Clerck, a Belgian educator sent on a Unesco field mission to Vietnam, illustrates how the modern school fails in a traditional rural environment when it caters solely for schoolchildren. "School education cannot be effective unless parents from the very start fall in with the new ideas and behaviour their children are being taught in class," he writes. Hence, the need to educate parents and adults in general in order to bring about fundamental changes in ways of life and thought that affect health, home life, agriculture or any other activity controlled by habit and tradition.

Mr. de Clerck, who spent eight years in Vietnam from December 1955 to December 1963, believes that community schools, of which a whole network now exists in Vietnam, can provide an answer to the problems of rural society. Vietnam, like most Asian countries, is predominantly agricultural: 85 per cent of its people live by farming, fishing, stock raising or from local handicrafts. Consequently, the modernization of the country depends primarily on the development of its rural areas.

School for Life Through Living

But, as Mr. de Clerck points out: "Agricultural development depends not merely upon material factors such as the introduction of fertilizers and selected seeds, the use of modern agricultural implements, the granting of loans and so on. In the final analysis, it depends on a certain number of psychological and social factors."

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The western-type primary school, introduced into Vietnam in the second half of the 19th Century, was not designed to bring about such changes. True, its academic record is impressive: Vietnam is one of the Asian countries with the lowest illiteracy rate - nearly every male over the age of 15 can read and write. But this type of teaching was adapted to the needs of an essentially industrial or urban society: it ignored the rural world.

In the opinion of the Vietnamese Education Ministry, and of Mr. de Clerck and his colleagues in the Unesco mission, what was needed was a School for Life Through Living whose inspiration and practical achievements must be based on the child's immediate surroundings.

Such schools would cater also for adults and should be concerned not only with promoting new knowledge and practices, but with helping farmers to carry out co-operative undertakings.

#### Khanh-Hai - A Living "Laboratory"

It was from this idea that the Vietnamese community school was born. The foundations were laid in 1956 at the Tân-An Centre, created with assistance from the Unesco mission, and at Khanh-Hai, its "laboratory" village. The school at Khanh-Hai became a laboratory school for the Centre providing the framework for the research and experiments which led to a blueprint of the community primary school.

In eight years, the Tân-An Centre, which was in fact the first rural training college in Vietnam, trained some 650 teachers, both men and women (the latter accounting for about 40% of the enrolment). They are now teaching either in the 100 community schools spread throughout Vietnam, or in the 880 new schools opened during 1963-64 where the community school method is applied. In addition, almost all rural primary schools have now begun to study the local environment, usually the village where the school is located.

This study deals with the situation, the population and the social and economic conditions of the village. It enables the teacher to choose "centres of interest" or study themes related to problems which affect the community and which are introduced into each subject in the curriculum. Every year, the school undertakes the study of four or five of these themes - malaria, nutrition, chemical fertilizer, stock breeding, fisheries, handicrafts, etc.

"Roads" provide a typical example of one of these study themes. Lessons in the national languages, in writing, arithmetic, geography, natural sciences, drawing, etc., can all be centred around this theme. In the junior classes

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the children study the road or path which they take on their way to school, the people they meet, the buildings they pass - the pagoda, community house, dispensary, etc.

In the next classes, the children learn about the goods transported along the road; where they come from; where they are going to. In studying the course followed by the road through the village, the province, and the region, the child becomes familiar with map scales and learns to calculate distances.

In final classes, he studies the road network of the whole country, the comparative importance of road and river ways, the problem of transport between producer and consumer.

But the study of a centre of interest must also result in action to improve the community. So the children are asked what kind of problems exist in their village. Are the roads they take to school in good condition - in the dry season? in the rainy season? Are they suitable for carts, bicycles, cars? Gradually, the pupils come to recognize the obstacles that must be overcome, as well as the action and resources needed to do so.

#### The School and the Adults

Sometimes the problem can be worked out by the pupils themselves, helped by their teachers. This was the case at Khanh-Hai when the children built a footbridge across an irrigation canal dug by the villagers. But more often, the solution depends on their parents. This is why the community school also provides extension classes for adults along with discussions and meetings where projects are planned and then carried out cooperatively.

Since the 1962-63 school year, all teacher training institutes in Vietnam have included community education in their courses, and a special training course drawn up by the Unesco mission has been organized at the Pedagogical Faculty of Saigon University. (UNESCO FEATURES)

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#### CORRESPONDENCE COURSES FOR JOURNALISTS

On-the-job training by correspondence courses is being organized for newspapermen in Cuba by the Union of Journalists. Along with these courses, also to be taught by radio and TV, centres will be set up so that students can take examinations and receive practical training. (UNESCO FEATURES)

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