

Safety first when children return to school ^[1]

A field trip diary in Lao Cai province by Rana Flowers, UNICEF Representative in Viet Nam

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EXCERPTS

Since early February, all schools across Viet Nam have been closed due to COVID-19, which has disrupted learning for more than 21 million students. In the coming days, schools will reopen to welcome back students.

Last week, I visited schools in Trung Chai mountainous commune in Lao Cai province to better understand the schools' preparations underway to welcome students back. I was accompanied by Ms. Duong Bich Nguyet, Deputy Director of Education and Training for Lao Cai province and other education colleagues of the province and district.

The first destination was Trung Chai Preschool. This preschool has nearly 600 children aged 2-5 going to the main campus and other satellite preschools scattered across the commune.

The school administrators will have the task in the coming weeks to assess the learning gaps of students, even for the youngest ones, caused by the long closure. I talked with many parents and teachers from ethnic minority communities to understand the challenges they have faced – in managing learning at home, in accessing the internet, in reaching children who do not have devices at home. It was clear that very few families could partake in online learning, around 15% and the remainder relied on the worksheets delivered to their homes with the support of local authorities. This meant many students relied on parents or had to teach themselves – thus teachers recognize for all children there will be a period, extending over the summer – where they hope to catch up children, to to cover the necessary curriculum until the school year ends.

The greetings from children living in the commune was heartwarming. The children smiled and waved to welcome the UNICEF team. We were honoured to be treated as special guests in their commune.

In my discussion with parents and school administrators, all emphasized the need to ensure the safety of children when they return to school.

I particularly wanted to see for myself the efforts deployed by officials from the Department of Education and Training of Lao Cai province to ensure that clean water and soap is available for all students in the schools so that children can wash their hands regularly during a school day.

Ms. Ngan, a teacher at Trung Chai Preschool, explained to me that one of the biggest challenges to ensure health and safety of the youngest children when they go back to school is to constantly remind them to wash their hands. It takes a lot of repetition for children so young to develop the reflex. The good news is that once the practice is established – handwashing protects children and their families from all kinds of infection and disease – and it lasts for life.

Despite numerous challenges and limited infrastructure, educators in Lao Cai placed children's safety first to prevent the spread of COVID-19, and other infectious diseases. One of the challenges going forward is to ensure that all schools have running water – and that soap is always available – soap is not optional – clean hands are not optional – healthy children need soap to be a part of the budget line from the Government to all schools.

I have to admit that it was quite an adventure to walk on the slopes to visit a family in the commune. It humbled me to realize that young children have to walk the same slippery path every day to reach their school. Their road to school is not easy, and I felt very fortunate to make it to the bottom without landing on mine....

On my way, I saw many signs informing the population about COVID-19 and giving clear instructions to the population to prevent the spread of the disease and telephone numbers to contact if people feel sick.

When I reached the house of Dua, a beautiful mother of 4 children from Mong ethnic minority, a flock of ducklings welcomed me on the porch while the family remained inside to avoid close contact with strangers. The family lives in very modest conditions and Dua explained to me that these ducklings are the most valuable asset that the family owns.

I listened attentively as she shared openly the difficulties she has faced with her children at home in the last months and how she worries

that the pandemic might further disrupt their education in the months and years to come. Dua's eldest son, Pao, likes mathematics. It's been a struggle in the last months to keep up with his learning while the school is closed. The family doesn't have internet at home, and mobile internet is above their budget. During the social distancing period, Pao and his family stayed inside and did not go out. They followed strictly the guidance from the local authority. When staying at home, Dua sewed masks from cloth. She learnt the technique from teachers at Trung Chai Preschool. The kids confirmed that they missed school, their friends and talked about their teachers a lot. They were excited that they would return to school very soon after weeks of social distancing.

Finally, I visited Trung Chai Semi-boarding Lower Secondary, where Dung, a grade 8 student, showed me wonderful innovative ideas to recycle and protect the environment. Dung and many other students are part of the Social Innovation Club which was an idea initiated by UNICEF in Viet Nam.

I was deeply impressed by how creative those ideas and products were and how children show a genuine concern to protect their environment and their community. Dung shared with me that she is also passionate about preserving the cultural identity and values of Mong ethnic minority people in the Sapa region.

As I wrapped up my day trip in Lao Cai, I was reassured by the determination and efforts deployed to reopen schools, ensure safety of students and keep up with the learning. As the reopening of schools will slowly be introduced across the country – I want to encourage all parents to be patient, to recognize that safety comes first, to appreciate that all will be done to catch students up and to know that we have noted and are working to address their concerns about a digital divide that meant many could not benefit to the same degree from online learning. While witnessing the hardship that families endure, my final message is for them – please ensure all your children return to school. While they have been helpful in the fields, helping you work your land – escaping the hardship and poverty – depends on each of them receiving an education. The future of Viet Nam depends on them staying in school. Children who drop out now are exchanging short term gain for long term poverty. And that is not an equation that Viet Nam wants to live with in the future.

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