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A Bakhtinian Dialogical Approach to Understanding Young Vietnamese Children's Narratives and Identities Formation in Preschools

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ABSTRACT

Previous studies have claimed that young children's everyday narratives reflect their identities formation. Guided by Bakhtinian theory of dialogism and qualitative research, this paper aims to explore two young Vietnamese children's everyday narratives and identities formation in a preschool in Hanoi. Young children's identities formation is understood as an ongoing process of their articulation of others' words to make sense of themselves and the world. Children's narratives are conceptualized in multimodal forms of language (e.g. verballity, gestures, body movements) and were collected through diverse resources (e.g. close observation, informal conversations, fieldnotes, and artifacts). Semistructured interviews and informal conversations were conducted to access parents' and teachers' narratives about children. Data analysis was completed through two steps (including transcription and analysis of children's stories). The findings showed that children are agentive narrators in telling and constructing themselves. Cultural resources and adults' beliefs and practices are contextual factors influencing children's identities. These findings both support and differ from prior studies on teacher-child interactions in the Vietnamese context and recommend preschool teachers to design their classes as the dialogical environment to support children's well-being.

1. INTRODUCTION

Vietnam has made significant progress for its 26 million children over the recent two decades (UNICEF, 2016). Despite the government's tremendous attempt, children's voices in Vietnam are not fully regarded (Save The Children, 2020). Little research has explored young Vietnamese children's ordinary narratives and their identities from their perspectives (Burr, 2014). Framed within a Bakhtinian dialogical approach of language and the self, this qualitative study sheds light on the construction of young Vietnamese children's identities through their everyday stories, which has been underexplored in research. Guided by a Bakhtinian lens, children's identities formation is conceptualized as an ongoing process in which they articulate others' words to make sense of themselves and the world. This article addresses two research questions: 1. How do young Vietnamese children construct their identities in their everyday stories in early childhood education (ECE) settings?; 2. What are influential factors in young Vietnamese children's identities formation?.

This paper includes four sections. First, Bakhtinian concepts of identities and stories, and the Vietnamese contexts are reviewed. Second, methodology within a dialogical multiple case study approach is provided. Third, findings from the cases of Duong and Nhi, two Vietnamese children aged 4-5 years old, are presented. This paper ends with the theoretical and educational contributions to early years education research, which enables Vietnamese educators to reconsider their knowledge of children's narratives to transform their practices.

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2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Bakhtin's concepts of narratives and identities

The research is foregrounded by Bakhtin's theory of dialogism. From a Bakhtinian lens, utterances exist in diverse forms of language (e.g., spoken language, silences, gestures, body actions, texts, art). The theorist writes:

if the word "text" is understood in the broad sense - as any coherent complex of signs then even the study of art (the study of music, the theory, and history of fine art) deals with texts (works of art). Thoughts about thoughts, experiences of experiences, words about words, and texts about texts (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 103).

The world, thus, is not comprehended singularly but "is seen, heard, touched, and thought" (Bakhtin, 1993, p. 56). Drawn by this idea, neo-Bakhtinian researchers emphasize that stories exist in plural forms of language (e.g., verbality, body actions, artifacts) (De Vocht, 2015; Frank, 2012; Vitanova, 2016). These forms of stories are identified by their answerability - an ability to address someone. Regarding the concept of identity, In Bakhtin's philosophical system, he rejects the view that the self is monologic, fixed, and complete. Every identity that a person builds and expresses is unique and situated in time and place, "everyone occupies a unique and never-repeatable place" (Bakhtin, 1993, p. 40). A person, therefore, has more than one identity, depending on the contexts in which it emerges. Bakhtin suggests an understanding of identities as diverse selves that arise in people's daily interactions with others in particular contexts (Cresswell & Baerveldt, 2011; Vitanova, 2010). A plural form of the word "identity" is used in this research to demonstrate the variety and dynamics of children's multiselves. The self is dialogic as people construct themselves in interconnection with others. Identities formation is a process in which people articulate others' words in multimodal narratives to develop their knowledge of themselves, people, and the world (Bakhtin, 1993). The articulation of others' words occurs continuously in every interaction and relationship, which leads to people's emergent and interdependent roles. Everyday narratives are mirror to reflect the construction of identities. People use multimodal forms of language to make sense of themselves.

De Vocht (2015), Matusov et al., (2019), White (2020) have brought Bakhtinian ideas to investigate young children's narratives and identities. Dialogical researchers examine children's oral articulation through listening to their stories and others' narratives about them. Researchers utilize their in-depth understanding of contexts, which they gain through close observation and conversations with participants, to seek the origins of children's narratives. One overarching point across dialogical studies is that the children's identities and their given contexts are considered in an interplay. From a dialogical viewpoint, children are interpreters and producers of their contexts. Dyson (1997) and Ødegaard (2007) examined the intersection of contextual factors in children's identities formation. The researchers highlight that cultural values, teachers' beliefs and practices, curriculum, and peer interactions interweave and influence children. Reciprocally, the very young utilize their prior experiences and personal desires to respond to contexts, "reenact regulations (e.g., rules, rituals) for a better understanding of self" (Cohen, 2017). Most reviewed studies, however, have been conducted in Western early childhood education (ECE) settings. No substantial research in Vietnam has employed dialogism as a theoretical lens to explore children's voices and identities. This study is the first one employing Bakhtinian ideas to value children as "persons with voices" (Hallett & Prout, 2003, p. 1) and the beauty of their narratives in constructing themselves in Vietnamese preschools. Guided by dialogism, this article conceptualizes that young children's narratives exist in multimodal forms of language (e.g., verbality, nonverbal actions, artifacts), and they continuously utilize their narratives to articulate others' words in preschools, which reflect their identities construction.

2.2. Vietnam's ECE context

In Vietnam, ECE refers to early childhood services for all young children from 3 months to 6 years old. Since Renewal in 1986, the ECE system in Vietnam has significantly changed thanks to rapid economic success and government investment. The government has stressed educational development, including ECE as "a primary national policy" (National Assembly Vietnam, 2013, p. 18). Despite the curriculum renewal and the government's effort, a transition from a teacher-led program to a child-centered approach has taken much time in Vietnam's ECE context (Vu, 2021). So far, a few studies (Dinh, 2014; Hoang et al., 2018; Leroy et al., 2021) have been done in ECE contexts to identify challenges facing teachers to listen to children's voices. These authors claim that adults-led activities and the figure of children as vulnerable prevent teachers from understanding preschoolers' diverse needs. The ways that young Vietnamese children use their interests and experiences to tell stories and how these narratives reflect their identities have not been explored. This paper is conducted to fulfill this gap, providing a holistic lens to understand Vietnamese children's voices in their ordinary lives.

3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This paper is derived from the larger qualitative multiple-case study with young Vietnamese children's narratives and identities across home and ECE settings in Vietnam and Aotearoa New Zealand (Pham, 2021). The study received ethical approval from the University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee. In this article, the stories of Duong and Nhi, two children in Hanoi, Vietnam, are purposely selected to present due to their insightful representations of the ways that children articulated others' words across multimodal language and spaces to make sense of themselves. Information of the participants, the procedures of data collection and data analysis are described next.

3.1. Participants

Duong and Nhi are two focal children; their parents and siblings, teachers, and their peers became co-participants in this paper. Brief snapshots of their biographical information are provided in subsequent parts. Names and settings are pseudonyms.

Duong was a 4-year-old boy living in Hanoi, Vietnam. Duong was enrolled in Bong Lua Class for children aged 4-5 years in Binh An Preschool near his apartment. Duong was in Bong Lua Class which comprised 18 children aged 4-5 years old. Linh and An were two primary teachers in the class. A typical day in Bong Lua Class began with breakfast time, greeting, and then continued with art and sport lessons, learning activities, Montessori activities, and learning English. During breaks, children could have free-play activities in the indoor area and an outdoor yard of the preschool.

Nhi was a five-year-old girl in Hanoi, Vietnam. Nhi was enrolled in Huong Duong Preschool when she turned 3 years old. The preschool was a private ECE setting on the two first floors of a building in the new urban area of Cua Tay District, next to Nhi's apartment. Nhi was enrolled in A3 Class for children aged 5-6 years old. Ha and Thanh were the teachers in A3 Class. A normal day at A3 Class began with morning exercises in the outdoor yard, breakfast time, 20-minute learning activities (e.g., getting acquainted with maths, language, and early literacy), English with native English teachers, and a limited time for free-play.

3.2. Data collection

Children's everyday stories emerge in their multimodal interactions with parents, teachers, friends, and siblings across home and ECE settings. These stories were collected through multimethod, including close observation, informal conversations with children, and a collection of their artifacts that they made during observation sessions. The researcher gathered stories in 10 weeks, two to four times weekly for a total of 4 to 7 hours per week for each focal child, which was based on the natural occurrence of events. The author observed the children at home (1 hour per week) and at ECE settings (3-4 hours per week) to gather their stories in daily activities. She also engaged in informal conversations with the child, his parents, teachers, and friends during observations to understand the meaning and origin of the child's words. Their artifacts during observation sessions were photographed. Two semistructured interviews and follow-up contacts were used to collect narrative accounts of parents and teachers about the children to understand the role of contexts in their identities construction. Fieldnotes were kept to mark key events during the data collection. In total, 45 everyday narratives, 115 pages of interviews, 30 pages of fieldnotes, 10 emails and messengers were collected for the cases of Duong and Nhi.

3.3. Data analysis

The dialogical narrative approach (Frank, 2012) was employed for data analysis. Followingly, young children's stories were inextricably analyzed in relation to parents' and teachers' narratives about them. Two steps in the process of analysis were: transcribing stories and analyzing stories. The researcher began data analysis by viewing and reviewing videotapes (listening and relistening, in the case of audiotapes) in parallel with children's artifacts and reading and rereading fieldnotes to transcribe video recordings and interviews. In the second step, the author used the Bakhtinian dialogical approach to build a four-layer analysis to interpret children's stories (Pham, 2021). These layers required viewing videos and artifacts, listening to audio recordings, and reading transcripts and fieldnotes in four different ways. First, the researcher acknowledged the interconnection between participants and her in data analysis. As a researcher, she identified her subjectivities and their impact on her interpretation of children's stories. Second, she distinguished interlocutors and their relationship with the child narrators in their stories. Bakhtinian terms dialogicality and monologicality were used to identify the relationship between speakers and audiences in children's narratives. Monologic talk is when speakers ignore their interlocutors' words and authoritatively highlight their own voices. Conversely, a dialogical conversation happens when speakers and interlocutors create "a contact zone"

(Bakhtin, 1981, p. 345) in which every voice matters and co-exists with each other. Third, the process by which children articulated others' words was examined to understand their identities. Other's words exist in two primary forms: quotes and echoes of the first speaker's utterances (Gillespie, 2006). Quotes occurred when child speakers repeated utterances of a specific person or group (e.g., friends, siblings, parents, and teachers). Echoes implied words, opinions, and beliefs that children absorbed from external resources (e.g., books, media, traditional heritage, and their wider community). The researcher triangulated different sources of data (e.g., interviews, field notes, informal conversations, and video transcripts) to identify the possible origin of others' words in children's stories. The third layer sheds light on the emergent identity that children have constructed in their narratives, which answers the first research question. Fourth, from a Bakhtin lens, children's identities and their milieus are interdependent. Children's stories and stories about them were positioned in their given contexts to see the reciprocity between contexts and children's identities, addressing the second research question.

In total, 45 narratives of Duong and Nhi were gathered and analyzed for this paper. Next, four episodes from Duong and Nhi (two per child) are presented to show the application of a dialogical approach to interpret the young children's narratives and identities formation in their preschools.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Results

- Duong's identities formation: A case of a child-centered approach:

Duong's interest was to bring Vietnamese folktales into his imaginary stories to tell teachers and friends. He was also enthusiastic about learning new skills (dancing, speaking English) by himself. Duong was enrolled in Bong Lua Class in which teachers respected children's preferences. Linh was Duong's close teacher in this class. She was inspired by the light of positive education and wanted to practice positive teaching through listening to children every day. Linh was engaged with Duong's interactions and supported his ideas. The two following stories show how Duong's stories, how Duong blended cultural resources and his interests to create everyday narratives and illustrated himself as a competent and confident communicator.

Story 1

Duong and other peers walk down on stairs to go to the playground. Linh accompanies them. On the corridor to the garden, he sees a small toad. Duong turns to Linh.

Duong: "Cô Linh ơi, con thấy một con cóc." [Teacher Linh, I see a toad]

(Linh and other children come to see the toad)

Duong: "Cóc ơi, Cóc ơi." [Dear Toad, dear Toad]

(Linh takes a branch and pushes the toad out into the garden)

Linh: "Nào các bạn lùi ra cho Cóc đi ra nào." [Come on, get out of the way to let Toad go out]

Duong: "Cô ơi, theo cô thì bạn Cóc có chết không?" [Do you think the friend Toad will die?]

Linh: "À bạn Cóc nhảy ra ngoài vườn về với tổ của bạn ấy rồi. Theo cô thì bạn Cóc không chết đâu." [Ah, the friend Toad jumps to his house in the garden. I think he will not die]

Duong: "Con cũng nghĩ bạn Cóc sẽ không chết đâu, vì Cóc là cậu Ông Trời, ai mà đánh nó thì Trời đánh cho." [I also think the friend Toad will not die, because Toad is uncle of Sir Sky, whoever beat him, Sir Sky beats them]

Linh: "Ồi Dương thông minh thế. Đúng rồi. Sao Dương biết câu chuyện đấy?" [Oh, you are so intelligent. Exactly. How do you know the folk tale?]

Duong: "Bà kể cho con nghe." [My grandmother told me]

Duong combined cultural resources that he learned from Vietnamese tales and his imagination to turn the animal into his friend. His concern with the friend Toad's life is rooted in his previous reading experience. In the tale "Cóc KIỆN Trời" (Toad Sues Sky), Toad led all animals on land to heaven to sue Sir Sky, who forgot to make rain for them. Sir Sky was angry and wanted to punish Toad for blasphemy. Toad, however, was so clever that he could solve Sir Sky's challenges. In the end, Sir Sky agreed to make rain and nominated Toad as his Uncle. Since then, whenever Toad ground his teeth, Sir Sky would pour rain. Duong articulated the tale of Toad's immortality that he got from folk heritage to defend his idea that Toad will never die in conversation with his teacher. In these stories, Duong's

identity emerged as a friend and savior of his living environment. In these stories, Duong's imagination influenced interlocutors' practices. Linh differed from Duong in explaining the world. Linh proposed that Toad could go back to his home in the garden so that he would not die, which was a common fact. Duong, meanwhile, innovated magic that Sir Sky would protect Toad from any harm. Linh accepted Duong's ideas. She learned to engage with Duong's "play" (Linh, informal conversation) and named Toad as "friend" and valued Duong as "smart." She learned to be led by Duong. Later, Linh shared that following Duong's ideas did not mean to "lie" but rather a way to "appreciate the child" (conversation). Linh also said that sometimes when she revisited Duong's stories, she "laughed alone" because they let her feel "the life was more lovely" (Linh, 2nd interview). Duong's imaginary story opened a sharing space between the child and his teacher.

Story 2

Han buys a small pair of chopsticks for Duong to use. He brings it to the preschool. At lunchtime, Duong puts a chopstick box on the table. He sits beside Khang, another boy in his class. Duong holds chopsticks for eating while other children use spoons. Linh sits next to them.

Khang: "Người bé mà lại cầm đũa. Người lớn mới dùng đũa chứ." [Why is a little child like you using chopsticks? Only adults use chopsticks]

Duong: "Người bé thì có sao đâu. Tại đây là đũa bé mà, có làm sao đâu. Tớ bé như thế nên tớ dùng đũa bé." [It's ok for the little. These are small chopsticks, so no problem. I am little, so I use small chopsticks]

Linh: "Duong, con thử lấy đũa gấp miếng su su xem nào." [Duong, can you use chopsticks to pick a chayote piece up?]

(Duong uses two hands to grip the top of the chopsticks so that he could pick a chayote piece up. Then he uses chopsticks to take this piece to his mouth. Afterward, he smiles at friends and teachers.)

Linh: "Bạn Duong dùng đũa giỏi quá." [Duong is good at using chopsticks]

(Khang turns to Linh).

Khang: "Cô ơi, mai con bảo mẹ mua đũa luôn." [I will ask my mother to buy me chopsticks tomorrow]

Linh: "Ừ. Để tuần tới cô sẽ dạy chúng mình bài 'Gắp thức ăn bằng đũa' nhé. Cô sẽ mua bím bím đến cho chúng mình tập với đũa." [Yes. Next week, I will organize a learning activity "Picking up food with chopsticks." I will buy snacks for you all to practice with chopsticks].

Khang's saying that chopsticks were suitable for only adults but not "the little" to use implied an inequity between adults and children. Duong's verbal and nonverbal language in story 2, however, conveys the child's attempt to blur this gap and defend his idea. Duong claimed an equal space in which the "little" mattered through his response to Khang (It's okay for the little... I am little, so I use small chopsticks). Afterward, Duong attempted to use chopsticks to pick a chayote piece up. His hand movement might not be skillful, but his effort was great. For Duong, chopstick utilization was not adults' privilege but rather the child's pride in his capacity. Duong's attempt revealed him as an agentive and confident person. Through this story, Duong asked others, especially adults, to respect him. Khang wanted to have chopsticks like Duong to practice. Linh praised Duong's efforts in utilizing chopsticks. Then she told the children that she would organize a learning activity to let them get familiar with using chopsticks. Duong's actions changed adults' responses. Together, adults and the child decrease inequity between them. Two stories of Duong show the value of imagination and emergent confidence in Duong's narratives and identities formation. Duong blended fantastic ideas with multimodal forms of languages (talking, hand movements) to create his stories and construct himself as an agentive and competent person. The case of Duong revealed the power of cultural resources and a child-centered approach in teachers' practices, which supported the child's preference in constructing himself. The traditional culture (folktale) provided materials for Duong. The child did not only absorb but also blended these cultural resources into his role play and special interests to make new ideas. The teacher recognized these cultural materials, engaged with Duong in everyday stories, and followed his interests. The teacher's practices were inspired by Duong's interaction with Khanh. In turn, Duong had the freedom to defend himself.

- *Nhi's identities formation: A case of resilience:*

Nhi grew up in settings in which children were expected to follow adults' guidance. In her class, children were required to have "good behavior" (Thanh, conversation) and listen to teachers' instructions. Teachers, however, reflected that children always broke this rule and made noise. Ha had taught A3 Class as headteacher for 3 years. In

her pedagogy, she wanted to become a friend of children and simultaneously believed in discipline. Ha shared that “light penalties” must be used in these situations (e.g., standing in the corner) to remind them about boundaries. Nhi and her friends were in transition to primary school during the data collection. In Nhi’s class, teachers prepared more literacy and numeracy lessons for children. These lessons were at odds with the ECE National Curriculum, which recommended teachers not teach writing at preschools. Ha explained that she taught these lessons to help the students to be “well-prepared” when they faced “academic pressure” (conversation) in primary schools. The two following stories reveal how Nhi used multimodal language (silences, verbal speech) to interact with the teachers and construct herself in different ways.

Story 3

At A3 Class, Nhi and Giang, a 5-year-old classmate, sit next to the table to have breakfast. Ha sits next to them. Giang turns to talk to Nhi.

Giang: “Câu sẽ vào trường Sun School à?” [Will you go to Sun School?]

(Nhi eats and nods her head)

Nhi: “Ừ.” [Yes]

Giang: “Mẹ tớ bảo tớ vào Nam An thôi.” [Mom tells that I will go to Nam An School]

(Ha smiles and talks to Nhi).

Ha: “Nhà Nhi có điều kiện cho nên Nhi phải chọn Sun School. Vì ba mẹ Nhi làm được nhiều tiền cho nên Nhi chọn Sun đúng không Nhi?” [Nhi’s family is affluent so Nhi must choose Sun School. Nhi’s parents earn much money so you can choose Sun School, right Nhi?]

(Nhi raises her head to look at Ha, grinning, then bows to eat. She keeps silent for a while)

Inside Ha’s words was her monological perception of the schooling world in which families’ financial conditions determined children’s school options. The tuition fees for Sun School were three times higher than those of other public settings like Nam An, where Giang would enroll. In response, Nhi gazed at Ha and then was silent. When I asked why she did not say anything, Nhi replied, “I don’t like Ha to say like this. I don’t like to talk.” The silence was a way for her to show her discomfort with reference to money and financial status. The next story, meanwhile, reveals a different situation in which Nhi invited utilized play to negotiate the right to play with the preschool teacher.

Story 4

In a learning activity to get acquainted with mathematics at A3 Class, Ha teaches children to divide a group into a smaller part. Ha asks children to split six counting rods into halves at the end of the learning activity. Children talk loudly. Ha requires them to “keep quiet” to acquire the “essential knowledge” for students-to-be. Children stop for a while, do their work, and then continue making noise. Ha says that anyone who continues talking will be punished and made to stand in the corner. “They make noise because there is nothing funny for them to play. Shall we have a fun game to play together?” says Nhi. Other children support this idea. Ha watches the clock, only 5 minutes left. She asks the children which game they want to play. Nhi has an idea that they can play the game “Doing Reversal” in a new style. Nhi explains that a selected person stands first, with the others behind to make a queue. If the selected person says or does anything, the others must do the reverse. For example, if the first person raises their hands, people behind them must lower their hands. Ha and other friends agree with Nhi. Ha asks children to tidy their counting rods and make a queue. She turns on the song “Baby Shark” on her phone and stands at the head of the queue. Children and Ha laugh and start the game together.

Ha’s task and commands conveyed monological practices (Matusov, 2009), which led to a gap between the children’s needs and the teacher. Nhi’s game “Doing Reversal” initiated a shared context for teachers and children to enjoy “fun.” Ha shared later that Nhi’s saying “a lack of fun” reminded her to “let children have a break after studying” (Ha, conversation). Directed by Nhi’s ideas, Ha changed herself from a disciplinarian to a playmate of children. Through playing, Ha let the child’s words lead her work. Her response became dialogical, and children had more space to express their interests and joy. This story revealed Nhi’s identity as an influential person who innovated fun to influence the teacher’s practices and blur boundaries between adults and children.

Two stories conveyed how Nhi used multimodal language (silence, verbal speech) to express different roles in relation to her teacher. While the child’s silence in story 3 implied her discomfort with the teacher’s saying, her

suggestion in story 4 was an invitation for the teacher to engage with the class. The teacher's monological response might be a reason for Nhi's silence in story 3. Nhi, however, acted on her agency and influenced the teacher to change her practice in story 4.

4.2. Discussion

This paper has explained how the two young Vietnamese combined multimodal languages to develop their narratives and express themselves and the influential factors in their identities formation. The findings describe children as agentive persons in telling and constructing themselves. Cultural resources and teachers' responses play a key role in the children's narratives and identities formation. The findings in this article both adhere to and challenge prior studies in narratives and the early childhood education field.

Firstly, this study has shed light on multimodal forms in children's everyday narratives. Previous narrative research has focused on children's verbal speech as primary data. Multimodal modes of children's narratives and the intersection within these modes have not been fully identified. Few studies (e.g., Kinnunen & Einarsdottir, 2013; Pahl, 2009; Puroila, 2013) have employed a semiotics view to exploring children's multimodal language in their spontaneous stories in Western kindergartens. This study adheres to preceding research showing that young children are experts in interacting with people and the world in multimodal ways. This paper, however, differs from the previous work by drawing from Bakhtin's theory of dialogism. Guided by a Bakhtinian lens of plurality in utterances, this study explored the construction of children's identities in their narratives in Vietnamese preschools. Previous studies in Vietnam focus on data from teachers' and parents' perspectives rather than gaining young children's views of themselves (Dinh, 2014; Hoang et al., 2018; Leroy et al., 2021). As the first one using close observation as the primary method to listen to children's voices in the Vietnam context, this study claims for Vietnamese children's agency in their identities formation. Duong and Nhi combined and transformed diverse forms of language (silence, gesture, body movement, verbality) to defend themselves as proactive persons in relationship with their friends and teachers in preschools.

Secondly, the findings reveal the influence of cultural resources and teachers' beliefs and practices on Vietnamese children's identities formation. A native Vietnamese thought is "vạn vật hữu linh" [everything has its spirit]; humans and nature are interdependent. The echo of this relatedness can be found in Duong's story of the Toad. The fairy tale Toad Sue Sir Sky inspired Duong to think of an animal as his friend and illustrate himself as a caregiver of the environment. One finding in the research is an emphasis on teachers' beliefs and practices in children's identities formation. In Vietnam, the National ECE curriculum values a child-centered approach, but teacher-led activities are still the primary approach for learning and teaching in preschool settings (Lenaerts et al., 2017). Some researchers (e.g., Dinh, 2014; Hoang et al., 2018) conclude that Vietnamese teachers' discipline usually restricts children's activities. This study is both coincident and noncoincident with this view. Stories showed that under an umbrella of the Vietnamese ECE curriculum, teaching and listening to the child differed between Nhi and Duong.

Ha's reference to Nhi's family background in story 3 and her initial words of disciplines in story 4 resonated with earlier studies of teachers' leading role in Vietnamese preschools (Hoang et al., 2018; Lenaerts et al., 2017). Story 4, however, witnessed Ha's transformation in her practice. Later, she accepted Nhi's initiation to co-author a new story of playing. In telling and playing, Ha was not bounded by familiar norms of teachers' domination. She accompanied Nhi and other children to restructure the class from a monologic space of teachers' discipline to a narrative environment of dialogicality. Reciprocally, Nhi had more freedom to portray herself as an agentive person.

Duong's stories feature the teacher's dialogical response and respect for the child's interests. Duong, thus, had shared spaces to raise his voices and show his confidence freely. Linh's responses to Duong's desire to use chopsticks (Story 4) showed her openness to listen and learn to be directed by the child. Kuby and Vaughn (2015) assert that teachers' openness to respond to young students is vital to make school settings open to their multimodal narratives. Echoing the idea, this study conveys that Linh's practices led the preschool setting to become "opened spaces" of listening and storytelling. Consequently, Duong gained diverse opportunities and spaces to express himself as an innovative and confident person in his narratives and identities formation. The cases of Duong and Nhi showed the vitality of teachers' response to children in their development. As a result, preschool teachers are suggested to attentively listen to multimodal forms of children's narratives and then use their understanding of these stories to change their practices, which is essential for children to develop their agency.

5. CONCLUSION

Inside each story are the child and their worlds. This paper has employed the Bakhtinian dialogical approach in understanding the fruitful meanings of children's narratives and identities construction in Vietnamese preschools. The research encourages preschool teachers and educators to view children as proactive subjects rather than innocent objects created by adults. When parents and ECE teachers reach an in-depth comprehension of children and their cultural resources, they can provide dialogical responses to young children. Letting children's uniqueness lead adults' work is needed for parents, teachers, and researchers to accompany children in their development. This research is limited in the number of participants. Future research is suggested exploring young Vietnamese children's narratives and identities formation across home and preschools in larger numbers, which is essential to help Vietnamese researchers and educators enhance their understanding of children's voices and well-being.

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