

# To Vietnam's Children—with Love

**A**t the outset, I must tell you that my present life seems a bit unreal—maybe surreal.

When I left the comfortable confines of Vancouver Community College in 1991 and began my own education and training consulting firm, it seemed unalterably clear that with an MBA in Urban Land Economics, a doctorate in Adult Education, and over 20 years either teaching business administration subjects or as a campus Dean of Instruction, I was destined to continue on this path.

That is, in some manner or form, I would continue participating in planning, implementing, and evaluating programs and projects that would be employment-related and adult-oriented.

True to form, one of the very first and one of my most interesting adult education program planning challenges was assigned to me by The Society. In the early 1990s,

I was tasked to lead a team to review and restructure The Society's traditional entry-level education program, jointly offered through the Open Learning Agency and the UBC Commerce and Business Administration Faculty.

Once that was accomplished, I then moved on to numerous Canadian and international assignments. To date, I have had assignments in 26 countries in Asia, Africa, the Middle East, the Caribbean, and central/eastern Europe. They have, as I predicted, centred on topics that concerned adult education and training.

So why, at the age of 65 and with all this specialized background, am I in this very remote northeast corner of Vietnam—near the Laos border? I usually work in urban centres, stay at nice hotels, and my local counterparts are ministry officials.

As I write this piece for The Society, however, my present mission is to inspect dilapidated schools that house impoverished children being taught by dedicated teachers

who have little if any supplies. In this, I am reviewing the initial or, as we call it, the “baseline” of a primary education program designed to deliver universal primary education to very poor and disadvantaged ethnic minority children.

I believe that Peter Drucker, one of the world's foremost organization and management decision-making gurus, may have described it best when he was asked the following question by a reporter a few years back. I paraphrase: *Now that you are in your early 70s, what type of decision-making process did you use to determine which paths to take to get you to this point in your life?*

Apparently, Drucker responded immediately (using the same analogy of the “path”) by saying the decision-making process was very easy. A specific life path that he was on normally took him in a direction that led to a crossroads. From that point he had many choices, all of which looked interesting and sometimes rather tantalizing.

How did he choose? He simply chose one and considered this new path an opportunity to explore. In other words, don't necessarily look too deeply or review the decision as only a cost-benefit calculation.

Maybe if I were younger I would have been somewhat hesitant about this philosophy of life, but in my early 60s—heck, if it worked for Peter, it may just as well work for Marvin!

Thus, this personal (or career, if you wish) decision-making process made rather a lot of sense to me, especially in December 2001, when I received a call from a



*Marvin with the children, their parents, and Vietnamese project team members in front of a primary school classroom in the Mai Son District (Son La Province), a remote Lao-speaking village*



*One of the young, mostly female primary school teachers, in late November, in a very cold shack-like classroom made of bamboo*

Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) Program Development Officer, asking if I knew anything about “Basic Education,” “Universal Primary Education,” or “Education-For-All.” My answer was quick:

- “a bit, if basic education only involved upper secondary with a vocational orientation, and
- nothing about the next two.”

He then said my response probably ruled me out about having any in-depth knowledge concerning primary education or, in this instance, grades 1 to 5.

“Yup!” I said. I have found it is always best to keep the answers short with these individuals as they are always in a hurry with telephone interviews—and it doesn’t make any difference which international agency they represent, e.g., the Asian Development Bank, World Bank, or the Caribbean Development Bank.

Wouldn’t you know it—there was an apparent impasse. But the Drucker philosophy, or “developmental life expanding hypothesis” as I would like to call it, had kicked in—a path had been previously created. In the period from 1994



*Pre-school and primary school children in front of their village classroom in Moug La District (Son La Province)*

to 1997, I had been given an opportunity to work with the Asian Development Bank on some (non-primary) education projects in Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam.

At that time, the region (the old French Indo-China or Indochine) was not considered really safe, but the path was there. Who could not be tempted? That experience—not only in the region but with the various ministries of education, especially the Vietnam Ministry of Education and Training (MoET), along with an introduction to the Vietnamese culture and “ways of doing business” and working with the MoET—tipped the balance in my favour. Actually, CIDA probably couldn’t find anyone else on such short notice.

### Canada is in the thick of it, but not working alone.

In any event, I am, after almost three and a bit years (December 2001 to now), considered somewhat of an expert in five fields I knew little or nothing about—and therefore five new paths have opened for me . . . maybe until I am 75 years old, as there is no mandatory retirement in this business—but you have to like to travel on relatively short notice and be prepared for interesting times.

The new paths are: universal primary education, basic education, education for all, SWAp or sector-wide approaches to funding education projects, and TBS or targeted budget support program funding mechanisms. Wow, has this been a mid-course change or what! My experience had been higher education, national labour force studies, technical education, and vocational training occupational standards and curriculum development.

What has it been all about and who are my clientele? The pictures speak for themselves. They are the children (and their families) of Vietnam’s very poor. They are the ethnic minorities (about 45 have been identified) who are fundamentally disadvantaged and who live in remote areas.

Over 40 percent of children are considered “at-risk” because they do



*One of many bamboo suspension (and swinging) bridges the project team had to cross to visit remote village primary-school classrooms that will be rehabilitated by a project involving the Canadian International Development Agency, United Kingdom, Norway, Australia, and the World Bank.*

not attend school at all or they receive low-quality education. Those “at-risk” include girl children, the very poor, ethnic minorities, recent migrants, street children, and the physically and intellectually disabled.

I am proud that Canada, through CIDA, has teamed-up with a number of other countries and the World Bank to become actively involved in four projects that aim at poverty alleviation through the primary education system. Canada is in the thick of it, but not working alone.

Where to next? Western China for three weeks in March to review another CIDA-funded program to train primary school teachers in student-centred instructional techniques.

And then, I am going to Italy with my wife Irma. She is giving me a new path for my 65th birthday present in May—we will be students (adult learners) at an Italian gourmet cooking school. Look out, Umberto! ▲

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Marvin Lamoureux was one of three educators featured in the Cover Story of Vol. 8, No. 4 of *The Scrivener* in December 1999. [www.notaries.bc.ca/scrivener](http://www.notaries.bc.ca/scrivener). Click on archives.