



Duy's story

A profile from
Young Lives in Vietnam

*"I can't help him with his homework ...
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Duy's mother

Duy's story

Duy is now 9 years old. His parents moved to a new house two years ago, which they built with help from his grandparents. He is settled in school and is very happy because he now has a room of his own. And his father had just taken him to visit the capital, Hanoi, to see some of the sights.

The Young Lives interviewer describes her visit:

"I went to Duy's house at about 8am as arranged. When I arrived, I saw his grandfather shovelling sand for the floor. He invited me to drink some water and then told me to go upstairs to Duy's room. Duy was studying at his desk. The bookshelf was neatly organised. On his desk, there were Vietnamese, essay writing and science textbooks. He was concentrating on studying so much that he did not notice me. He was doing his Vietnamese homework on the topic of 'Enhancing Vocabulary: Optimism – Joy of Living'. Thirty minutes later, he finished his homework and we started our conversation sitting at his desk."

Duy says his parents' new house is the most beautiful in the area. Previously, his family had to live in a small old house with a pigsty in the front yard, which he said was "very disgusting". He is most excited about having his own bedroom where he can study.

Duy's mother talks about the hail storm two years previously that severely damaged their orange trees as well as the fruit. Because of this, they switched to growing Bengal figs (a type of bonsai tree).

She explains how they came to have a new house:

"My husband intended to move to the south to live, but my great uncle and grandfather said, 'What will you do there? If you have money, you should build a new house rather than moving there.' So we decided to build this house. We paid the masons a flat rate. We had to borrow a lot [of money]. My parents-in-law gave us some, and we borrowed the rest from others. Our brothers and sisters in-law lent some us as well."

Have you paid off all the debt?

Yes, there is only a little left."

While the house was being built, Duy's mother went to market every day to sell pork, but she has stopped going now to focus on the family's bonsai business. She says that the building of the new house, along with her marriage and the birth of her children, was one of the happiest events of her life.

When we last spoke to Duy and his family, he was 6 years old. He lived in a quiet rural area with his younger sister and his parents and grandparents. He has an older brother who was already living away from home. He had just started primary school and was rather anxious about it.

When the Young Lives team last visited, Duy was enjoying school. He is still keen to learn, although he doesn't like his current teacher, who has replaced his former teacher, who is on maternity leave.

His mother says that he has got to the stage when she and his father can no longer help with Duy's homework:

"I can't help him with his homework at his grade level. I could help him when he was in the 1st or 2nd grade. But the school programme now has changed a lot; I can't understand anything. I didn't study much, so I don't know anything. Occasionally, he finds the homework so difficult that he asks his father and grandfather but they can't always help him either. He often does his homework by himself but I don't know if it was right or wrong."

Duy says he likes all his subjects but finds writing essays the hardest. His parents encourage him to study both in the morning and after school. His mother says: "Sometimes when he gets bad grades, I say, 'Perhaps you have played too much recently.'"

Duy agrees that he likes playing, in particular football and skipping and watching films and cartoons. Asked about what else he does in his spare time, he talks about a trip to Hanoi with his father, where they went to the zoo and saw many animals and to the Ho Chi Minh Mausoleum. He calls Ho Chi Minh 'Uncle Ho'. He visited Uncle Ho's famous fishpond, where he saw many big golden fishes and fed them bread.

He had been to Hanoi before with his grandfather. That was the first time he had crossed the river on a boat. He remembered the trip because when the boat reached the middle of the river, it bobbed up and down, and scared him. He was very afraid and had to hold onto his grandfather tightly. They went to visit his little cousins' family. They had so many toys that Duy's parents had never bought for him – a tank and a plane and many others. When he had to go home, he was very sad and wanted to stay longer.

His mother thinks that schools in urban areas like Hanoi are better than those in rural areas like theirs:

"For example, there are only so many computers. They have to take turns; they have to wait for a long time to use the computers. Schools in Hanoi have enough equipment, schools in the rural areas don't. In my opinion they don't teach very well in rural areas."

Both Duy and his mother also talk about his journey to school, which is two kilometres away. They say that the road is not in good condition and that it is dangerous for children to go to school by themselves. Until he was in the 4th grade, Duy was not allowed to ride a bicycle to school, but now he does sometimes, although his mother prefers him not to. She says:

"I see the children riding bikes carelessly and am a bit worried, but I can't fetch him all the time. He sometimes has to ride to school by himself. He is in Grade 4 now. He has known how to ride a bike since he was in the first grade, so he can ride very well, unlike other children who have learned recently. So I am not too worried about the way he rides his bike; I am just worried about other people."

Duy agrees that he is a good bike rider, but he is still afraid riding on such a bad road, especially whenever a big truck passes by. He told the Young Lives team that one of his schoolmates was crushed to death by a truck because his bicycle hit a stone and he went under the back wheels of the truck.

Like many Vietnamese parents, Duy's mother and father pay for their son to have extra classes, especially in the summer holidays. His mother tells him to: "Concentrate on studying to have a good future. If you don't study, you will be like your father. He has to work hard every day. You should study to be happy and be better off in future."

Duy says his biggest dream is to become a doctor or a policeman. He wants to have a gun and wear uniform like the police in the drama 'Criminal Police' on TV. He hopes that if he studies hard he will win the 'good student' prize and his father will take him to the zoo again next summer.

Education quality and the prevalence of extra classes in Vietnam

Vietnam spends a relatively high percentage of its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) on education, and almost all children are enrolled in primary school. But there are a number of concerns about the quality of the education they receive. For example, teaching methods are seen as ineffective as they do not encourage creative thinking. The curriculum is out of date, and in many schools, the school day is only four and a half hours long at primary level and five and a half hours at upper secondary level.

In addition, teachers' salaries are low and many therefore also teach extra classes, which have become almost mandatory even for the poorest families. Of the children and young people in the Young Lives study who go to school, 75 per cent of older children and 65 per cent of younger children attend such classes. Among older children, 80 per cent of girls take extra classes compared with 70 per cent of boys. These classes are expensive for poor families, who make many sacrifices in order to be able to afford them. Among the younger children, the figures are almost equal for both boys and girls. However, the rate varies widely between regions, and according to the level of caregiver's education, ethnic group and poverty.

Ninety per cent of students say that they take extra classes to improve their academic performance. The next most important motivation is that they think the extra classes will help them in their exams. Only a few students say that they attend extra classes because they do not learn enough at their normal school.

Source: Le Thuc Duc et al. (2012) *How Do Children Fare in the New Millennium? Initial Findings from Vietnam*, Young Lives Round 3 Survey Report.

*“If you don't study, you will be like your father.
He has to work hard every day.”*

Duy's mother



Country context: Vietnam

Over 88 million people from 54 different ethnic groups live in Vietnam. For most, living conditions have steadily improved since the 1990s. Vietnam is now considered a 'medium human development' country, and ranks 128 out of 187 in the United Nations Human Development Index. Average life expectancy is 75.

The Government has been gradually moving the country from being a centrally planned Communist state to a market-oriented economy. It has introduced a number of programmes to address poverty and social deprivation, and much foreign aid has also been targeted at poverty reduction.

The country was badly affected by the global recession in 2009. Food prices increased and exports went down. There are widening gaps between rich and poor, and between the majority ethnic Kinh and the country's many minority populations.

- The number of people living below the official poverty line continues to decline, from 16 per cent in 2006 to 11 per cent in 2010.
- This masks a big gap in poverty rates between majority and minority groups. In 2008, only 9 per cent of the ethnic majority population was poor, but almost half the ethnic minority population.
- Gender discrimination continues to undermine the well-being of women and children.

Children

- About 2.6 million children are classified as being in need of special protection, including those with disabilities, orphans and those in poverty.
- The Government has made efforts to improve healthcare services for women and children, and Vietnam now ranks 90th in the world for under-5 mortality.
- Among under-5s, 5 per cent are underweight, 8 per cent are wasted (thin for their height) and 32 per cent stunted (short for their age).
- Enrolment rates at primary school are 97 per cent. In Vietnam, boys are more likely to drop out of secondary school than girls.

Sources: www.younglives.org.uk; UNDP (2011) *Human Development Report 2011*; Le Thuc Duc et al. (2011) *How Do Children Fare in the New Millennium? Initial Findings from Vietnam*, Young Lives Round 3 Survey Report; UNICEF (2012) *State of the World's Children 2012*.

Young Lives is a unique international study investigating the changing nature of childhood poverty in Ethiopia, India, Peru and Vietnam. By following the lives of 12,000 children and young people over 15 years, we aim to improve understanding of the causes and consequences of childhood poverty and provide evidence to support effective policies for children.

The profile presented here is one of 24 taken from the interviews we did with the children individually and in groups. Each one is accompanied by a theme of some kind that emerged from the material and which illustrates the issues that children are having to contend with, but also gives a sense of the wider context of their lives. These range from education and schooling, to inequality, health and illness, violence in school and at home, early marriage, the effects of migration, families' experiences of crises, government schemes to help poor people, and children's views and experiences of what it is to be rich or poor.

The children and their families who are participating in the Young Lives study willingly share with us a great deal of detailed personal information about their daily lives, and we have a responsibility to protect their confidentiality and ensure their identities remain protected. For this reason, the children's names have been changed here. The accompanying photos are of children in similar situations to the children within our study sample.

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Young Lives 
An International Study of Childhood Poverty