

Fall 2011

# Morality, Mathematics, & Music Class: A Case Study of a First Grade Vietnamese Classroom

Emma James  
*SIT Study Abroad*

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# Morality, Mathematics, & Music Class: A Case Study of a First Grade Vietnamese Classroom

Emma James

Fall 2011

World Learning

SIT Study Abroad. Vietnam: Culture, Social Change, and  
Development

## **Abstract**

For a Vietnamese child, first grade is their introductory gateway to society. It is the first time they will be working within a large group of people their own age, learning how to become an effective and contributing citizen to the community they're within. Much of the first grade curriculum focuses on how students should behave not only in the classroom, but outside the school walls. This case study was conducted in the Le Loi Primary School in Hue, Vietnam. My goal was to uncover the main moral values instilled at the first grade level. For two weeks I observed in one first grade classroom, watching the students as they learned, played, and interacted with one another. I determined that an emphasis was placed on conformity and obedience. This wasn't simply apparent in the way teachers demanded a student's attention, but through interactions between students, the curriculum, and the teaching methods. Ultimately students are taught to comply with what society wants by behaving in specific ways to fit the accepted and recognized cultural norms. Students are molded into the citizens that Vietnam wants running their communities: loyal, obedient, and pragmatic in the sense that they conform to the established norms– they don't try to create their own. Overall much of the school day is based on this importance of conformity and obedience.

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## Acknowledgements

First and foremost I would like to thank my academic director Co Thanh. Co Thanh is relentless in her networking, if one of her students needs to know someone she will find that connection. If not for Co Thanh I would never have been in Le Loi Primary School. Of course, I also need to thank my program assistant Vy Dinh– she was always there assisting Co Thanh but also became a good friend. Another big thanks to Thu Dang for her connections and hospitality during my stay in Hue. She introduced me to many of the Hue Student volunteers and helped with the approval paperwork needed for my entrance at Le Loi Primary School. I am extremely grateful for my collaborating teacher, Co Dung, for allowing me to observe in her classroom. I can only assume that having a strange foreigner sitting in on class can be distracting, intimidating, and a hassle, but she always welcomed me.

Finally I would like to thank all the Hue student volunteers, especially my friends Thanh and Thien for sitting with me in multiple classes and being so patient with my never ending questions. I believe that in the course of two weeks I had eight different volunteers and I will always be thankful for their help, especially considering that they already have such busy lives. The two sessions I attended without the help of a translator were not nearly as productive as the other days when I had company. The study would be nowhere near as comprehensive without the help of the student volunteers, my new friends.

## Introduction.

Primary education, especially the first few years, is a time for children to learn how to socially interact with one another, be respectful, and follow the set rules. Much of the curriculum is focused on teaching students how to act in a proper way, how to contribute to a society, and how to become an effective citizen. For many children, primary school is the first time they are exposed to working within a large group of people their own age. This naive and untrained social behavior makes for an interesting dynamic in the classroom, as students have yet to learn the proper way of society. It is in primary school where students are first introduced to these moral values and are taught how to become an effective and contributing citizen to the society they're within. In Vietnam, "proper manners in human relations are the very first thing to be learnt at school, while knowledge and language are only secondary."<sup>1</sup> The goal of this study was to identify how students are taught these "proper manners in human relations;" that is what cultural norms are students taught in a first grade classroom? Furthermore I wanted to research how these norms are present in both the curriculum and the teaching methods; in other words: how teachers instill moral values into their students.

For this case study I observed in Le Loi Primary School in Hue, Vietnam. I was in a first grade classroom with a collaborating teacher named Co Dung. After my twenty plus hours of observation in Le Loi I determined that the moral values most prominent in the first grade classroom, as well as the way the classroom is run, are obedience and conformity. Everything in the classroom is about conforming and obeying— follow the rules, obey the teacher, adhere to the nation, and comply with cultural norms the way they are. Students aren't only taught conformity to fulfill certain life roles, but are inculcated that conformity is more appropriate

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<sup>1</sup> Dung Hue Doan. "Moral Education or Political Education in the Vietnamese Educational System?" *Journal of Moral Education* 34.4 (2005): 451-63.

versus innovativeness. Ultimately students are taught to comply with what society wants by behaving in specific ways to fit the accepted and recognized cultural norms. Students are molded into the citizens that Vietnam wants running their communities: loyal, obedient, and pragmatic in the sense that they conform to the established norms– they don't try to create their own. Overall much of the school day is based on this importance of conformity and obedience.

Before I go any further in this essay it is necessary for me to define morality, conformity, and obedience, as well as some different factors between these values and similar ethics.

“‘Moral’ in the Vietnamese context is a broad term, relating to the practice, manners or conduct of human beings in relation to each other. Moral education is also associated with standards of behavior justified by people as right and proper, and is to be conducted willingly without the interference of law. Moral education is also understood as perspectives, viewpoints and behavior of people in such social relations as self in relation to other persons, groups and organizations”<sup>2</sup>

Brehm and Casline defined obedience as the tendency to change our perception, opinions, or behavior in ways that are consistent as group norms. Obedience is defined as a behavior change produced by the commands of authority, again from Brehm and Casline.<sup>3</sup> While trying to figure out how to define what I saw in the classroom I struggled to identify the difference between respect and obedience. Respect is one of the defining moralities in every classroom– respect the teacher, respect the students, and respect yourself. However, in Co Dung's classroom it wasn't so much respect everyone, but who should be respected and why. As each day wound down I became more and more intrigued by this and finally realized the best way to broaden respect was by including obedience. Students can show their respect by observing the rules of the

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 451-463.

<sup>3</sup> Brehm, S.S. *Social Psychology/readings in Social Psychology*. [S.l.]: Houghton Mifflin, 1999. Electronic.

classroom, obeying the teacher, following the class monitor, fulfilling filial duties, and adhering to the country. I simply couldn't say "respect" because they are taught to respect through obedience, but also to be obedient by respecting. As my essay goes to show, in the process of conforming students show the utmost respect and obedience to those that demand it. I would also like to differentiate between obedient and obeying— students aren't taught to be submissive, but they are taught to respect those people and forces that deserve it.

For the purpose of my study I critically examined these moral values through three lenses of the classroom. The first lens is through the environment of the classroom, that is the interactions of teachers-students and students-students. The second lens was looking at the values in the set curriculum, what the lessons were actually focused on. Finally I observed the method and style of teaching through not only Co Dung but four special subject teachers as well. For the purpose of this paper I decided to divide my argument into these three different lenses to prove just how present the values of conforming and obedience are.

### **Methodology.**

#### *Participants:*

This study was conducted in a classroom with forty-four children, twenty girls and twenty-four boys. The students ranged between the ages of six and seven. The students shared the commonality that they were all zoned to Le Loi Primary School because of the location of their house, therefore meaning that socio-economic status differed slightly but was relatively similar. The classroom was random, my only request was to be with first graders; the principal assigned me to Co Dung's and I gratefully accepted without questions. The rationale behind requesting a first grade classroom was to see the children in the earliest stage of behavioral and societal development. Considering the time limit on my study, only ten days in the classroom, I chose to focus on a select number of students who were more outgoing and willing to talk with

me. This doesn't mean that I ignored the others, simply that it was easier to build relationships and observe those students who were more gregarious. Additionally, I was able to observe certain students in more detail due to my physical location. Everyday I sat in the last desk on the left-hand side of the classroom; the students also sat in the same seats everyday, meaning by convenience I observed some first graders in greater detail. By the end of my two weeks, I feel like I knew the learning styles and could predict how the students directly in front of me would act with much more ease than say, the students sitting in the front row.

*Procedure:*

Starting Monday the 21<sup>st</sup> of November 2011, I spent at least two hours a day observing in the classroom. The times of day that I went to the school ranged, sometimes I went at 7:00 in the morning when students were first arriving, other times I went when they had just awoken from their afternoon nap. The reason for visiting the schools at varying time was so I would see the students in different states of minds throughout the day. I could observe how they behaved in class first thing in the morning, the way they reacted to situations when they were tired or hungry, and how they interacted with one another during free time such as recess or lunch. I would sit in the back of the class with my notebook and take extensive notes on what was happening in the classroom. This included the curriculum, the actions of students, the tone of voice of the teacher, conversations that took place between students, and really anything else that stood out to me. Typically there wasn't much interaction between the students and myself due to the language barrier. There was one day when the English teacher had me teach the class, and in this sense I was much more of a participant observer.

It is important to note that this study was almost purely my own observation and opinion. Unfortunately, there is not much data on Vietnamese primary schools, therefore there

isn't much of academia support throughout the paper. Prior to my entrance into Le Loi Primary School I did a lot of research on moral values instilled in the classroom but many of these were from Western perspectives and countries, therefore they are not relevant to my argument.

*Limitations:*

I frequently brought Hue University students with me to help translate what was happening in the class, but even so it is very difficult to have casual conversations with the first graders while using a translator. Many times the students would come up and talk to me, but the moment I took out my notebook and would have my translator ask them a question they would stop talking and look very skeptical, perhaps nervous that everything they said would be recorded. This was probably the biggest issue with my research. Another problem was that unfortunately, many of my translators didn't quite understand the purpose of my research. A study on primary schools is a rather peripheral topic in the eyes of a Vietnamese University student— anthropology in general is quite obscure. If the language barrier didn't exist I would have much stronger data and quotes to support my thesis. Even with the language barrier I am still confident in my study, I just know it could be more concrete if I spoke the language or if all of my interpreters truly understood my study.

This was the first time that I have conducted research in another country and I found it difficult to keep my cultural norms at bay and try to remove any bias. This is mainly accounted to my thirteen years of experience in the American education system but also for the past two semesters I have spent time in both a kindergarten and first grade classroom, observing and tutoring students. While in the Vietnamese classroom I constantly found myself comparing it to the classroom and students that I worked with back home. I frequently had to remind myself that the American education system is not universal or the right way of teaching, therefore

things that I found strange and different in the Vietnamese school aren't wrong, they are just some of the cultural differences reflected between the two societies. Just because a school does something differently doesn't mean it is inefficient, in fact it may be better than the methodology of American schools.

Although the allotted ISP time is one month, I only spent two weeks observing in the school. The first week I was waiting on the final approval from the local government and Le Loi Primary School. When everything was approved, I was granted two weeks in the classroom. Originally, the principal had only expected me for one week and I had to request the second week. Following my last Friday in the classroom there was still one more week left in the ISP period, but I felt as though I would be imposing if I prolonged my stay. All in all, I only spent two weeks in the school but I was able to record twenty plus hours in the classroom. On the one hand, clocking over twenty hours in only two weeks was very impressive and I observed a lot of interactions and feel like I walked away from this study with a good knowledge of the dynamics of the classroom. On the other hand, simply put: this study was conducted in two weeks. My ideas, thoughts, and observations were in such a short period of time it was hard for me to know what I was looking for in the classroom. Because of that, my notes are very scattered and aren't extremely detailed; I didn't focus on compliance in the classroom until I had completed my observations. If I were to do this study again I would purely focus on dao duc, teaching students moral values. This class is only held twice a week so instead of doing a case study of one classroom I would ideally go to different classes and attend as many dao duc lessons as possible. This being said, I feel as though I was still able to grasp a firm understanding and really analyze and describe the moral values taught to the first graders in Co Dung's classroom.

## The Atmosphere & Environment

There is a clear distinction in the school environment versus the home environment; teachers don't coddle students. It is a professional, academic atmosphere making the mood a focused and aware one. The moment I walked into Co Dung's classroom I knew I was in a controlled setting just by the appearance of the students. All forty-four children were wearing uniforms and sitting with impeccable posture. Uniforms are widely recognized as representing discipline, obedience, systemization, and of course conforming— being one with a group. Therefore, simply by wearing the school uniform students are both conforming and obeying. The dress code isn't the only characteristic that displays the students obedience and respect to Co Dung and the school, when addressing any teacher students rise from their chair, cross their arms in front of their body, and speak in a clear and concise tone. Students never talk out of turn, and never interrupt the teacher. If they would like to answer a question they raise their hand and wait to be called on. The first graders are constantly reminded to sit with their backs straight, arms crossed, and shoulders squared, this is a sign that they are ready to learn and are paying attention. By holding their body positions in a certain way it proves the dedication they have for their teacher— they are obeying them.

The atmosphere of the classroom can be described as serious, attentive, and focused. The classroom is big and open with tall ceilings, making any loud noise bounce off the walls and echo throughout the room. The desks are arranged in four rows, each row consisting of six desks with two students per desk. Co Dung is constantly walking through the aisles and moving the desks, straightening them so they are in a perfect row. The desks all face the blackboard; below the blackboard is a stage, similarly seen in the University systems. This elevates the teacher so that everyone can see the blackboard, but at the same time I can't help but think that

it proves that the teacher has the control over the classroom, she reigns over all. At the front of the room hanging above the blackboard is a picture of Ho Chi Minh, staring at the studious first graders— motivating them to work hard, be diligent, and always be open to learning. The aesthetics of the room reflect the tone of the class. The classroom isn't warm or cozy; it is strictly a learning environment. Besides Uncle Ho, there aren't many visuals on the walls, eliminating diversions. Whereas a hanging poster can serve as a decoration it can also easily distract students with the words, colors, and designs. Students can easily lose concentration and focus on a poster instead of listening to what the teacher is saying. In Co Dung's classroom there is no opportunity to do so; students are focused on what she is saying. The desks all face forward so the students never have their backs to Co Dung or any other teacher.

This controlled atmosphere changes the moment Co Dung steps out of the room; it's quite impressive how much power she has simply by being present. When I visited the school for my initial meeting with the principal I had been swarmed by curious students, so the first morning I was in the classroom I was shocked that the students ignored me. When I came in for my afternoon session later that day I was treated quite differently, the children immediately greeted me with hello and parroting, "What's your name?" over and over again. They had all turned around in their chairs and were staring at me, curious as to why this foreigner was intruding in their classroom. I quickly realized the reason why no one had paid attention to me in the morning was because Co Dung had been standing at the front of the class, when I arrived in the afternoon she was nowhere to be seen. When she did walk into the classroom, she grabbed her yardstick and slammed it on the table. The sound resonated off the high ceiling and the students immediately turned around, faced front, shoulders squared, hands folded across their desk— ready to learn. This militaristic behavior is something that is hard for me to wrap my

head around. It is strange to see children react so quickly and diligently to harsh, cold, directions. However, that being said– it makes perfect sense that Co Dung must slam a ruler down for order, how else will she demand the attention of forty-four six year-olds? Do the children fear her; no. Does she intimidate them; yes. This intimidation leads to their impeccable obedient behavior and complying with what she wants.

The four rows of desks eliminate the opportunity for children to work together in groups or as teams. There are no circular tables where children gather around and discuss; the students sit at their desks doing their own individual assignments. There is rarely an emphasis on working together to solve problems, find solutions, or discuss the importance of a matter. There are the occasional classes when Co Dung will hang a poster on the board and ask students to discuss with their desk partners, but these conversations don't really take place. Students do not willingly turn to their neighbor to engage in an enthusiastic discourse on morality. When it comes to mathematics and Vietnamese students strictly pay attention to their own work. In fact, they are encouraged not to share with one another. While spelling words on their individual chalkboards, students were instructed to flip their boards over once they had written down their answer so their desk neighbor wouldn't see and copy it. However, the students learn from one another. When a child answers Co Dung's question incorrectly Co Dang replies with, "We have to have some help," encouraging another student to raise their hand and try to answer. Students do not work together to find an answer, but when they are wrong they learn from one another.

This strict ambience makes it more feasible for teachers to keep the students in line. The atmosphere is a serious and focused one and it encourages students to do the same. With a teacher walking around with a stick in her hand ready to rap it on the desk of the next student that talks out of line children are coerced into obedience, for fear that if they don't do as they

are told they will be punished. The harsh environment yields students that know how to follow the directions of not only their teacher but also the classroom monitor. In Co Dung's classroom the monitor was a young boy named Lang. Classroom monitors are chosen in an attempt to "maintain order and govern the conduct of students in class. Relay positions are afforded to group leaders, vice-monitors, and monitors, who are then expected to relay information about their classmates to the teacher. Class monitors in particular are delegated a substantial degree of authority to discipline their classmates."<sup>4</sup> Lang was chosen by Co Dung because his intelligence, good moral behavior, leadership qualities, and ability to take charge. Lang obtains the same respect, power, and obedience from his classmates that Co Dung receives. Students don't question the fact that Lang has a power that cannot be matched by any other child in the class. They respect that he is the monitor and they need to obey him, he can tell them what to do and they are expected to do it with no questions asked. Having the power to go the front of the room and yell commands in a harsh tone must give Lang a leg up in social situations where confidence is key. In a written interview with Co Dung I asked her if Lang had an advantage over the other students. Her response: "He is always more confident than other students because my careful choice."<sup>5</sup> Students realize who has power and the ways to obey them. It doesn't matter that Lang is the same age, is a classmate, and has the same skill and knowledge level—they respect him because they recognize his power and authority.

The above descriptions may make it is easy to imagine a tyrannous classroom, patrolled by a teacher with a stick, terrorizing the students. This is not at all the case. Co Dang creates relationships with and cares for each student, however, she treats them like adults, not children; meaning inappropriate behavior is not tolerated. If a child acts out, they will be punished. But

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<sup>4</sup> Horton, Paul. *School Bullying and Power Relations in Vietnam*. Diss. Linkoping University, 2011. Electronic.

<sup>5</sup> Co Dung. Written Interview. November 29, 2011.

when they behave, they will be treated with respect. Co Dang is incredibly encouraging and caring to all students. When the first graders answer a question correctly Co Dung will begin clapping followed by a short applause from the rest of the students. This is a positive reinforcement for students to work hard and contribute in class. They are encouraged to try to speak up– participation is a huge part, not necessarily in the form of class discussion but in the sense that it is a learning environment and everyone needs to be doing just that, learning. However, it is important to note that regardless of how much students contribute, Co Dung runs class, and they must respect and obey her.

The behavior of the students and teachers along with the environment they are in sets the tone for some of the main moral values found in the first grader’s curriculum.

## **Curriculum**

### **The role of a student:**

Although cultural and societal norms are influential in the atmosphere of the class, the students also receive direct instructions on the best way to behave in society. Since I first learned the different subjects taught, I had been looking forward to dao duc, teaching students morality and characteristics that are needed in Vietnamese society. The first class I attended was Friday morning 25 November. Co Dung started class once the bell rang and introduced the lesson of the day: How to attend school regularly and on time. Co Dung instructed students to keep their books closed as she hung a poster on the board portraying a group of woodland animals learning in an outdoor classroom. There was a cluster of desks arranged around a giraffe teaching a lesson on an easel. A tortoise, fox, and bird sat in three of the desks; the fourth desk was empty. Set off to the side of the outdoor classroom was a bear banging a drum

and behind the class on the other side of a pond was a hare, catching butterflies. It can only be assumed that the empty desk was for the hare.

The first part of the lesson involved observing and critically examining the scene on the poster. Each group was responsible for sending a representative to the board to best answer a question. The questions required the students to analytically look at the visual and make connections in the greater scheme of things, such as what animal did students want to be and why? The students spent a minute or so looking at the picture, some of them decided to discuss, others just continued to gaze at the picture on their own. Co Dung hinted at the way she wanted the students to think by asking leading questions. This gentle push not only directed the students towards the correct answer but also helped them make connections to their own life, ultimately the goal of the lesson.

The first group sent a representative to the front of the room. Co Dung asked the student questions regarding the difference in his class and the class in the poster. When the boy finished answering more students came to the front of the room to continue the discussion of the poster, the animals, and who is playing what role. Co Dung poised the question to the class, “What animals are studying?” “The tortoise, fox, and bird” replied the students. In the poster, the tortoise was portrayed as the animal most involved in the class; he is leaning into the easel with a look on his face eager to learn. Co Dung continued with her probing questions, “Now, I want as many people as possible to answer this question: What animal is lazy?” This is the first time all week long that I have seen Co Dung, let alone any teacher, encourage the students to speak out of turn. The children all eagerly waved their arms in the air as “the hare” is parroted across the classroom. Co Dung called on one student who stood up and formally answered the question. It seems to me that Co Dung permitted many students to respond because she wanted

to emphasize that the hare's idle behavior is not acceptable, especially when the tortoise is being so studious.

Co Dung further explored the hare and his disengaged attitude by asking the class about the hare's studying habits. With her guidance the students concluded that the hare is not studying because he is late to school. The bear has beat the drum signaling that school has started yet the hare continued to play. Co Dung asked the first graders which animal they would rather be— the tortoise or the hare, and to think about it when she tells a story. She then began to narrate the Aesop's Fable tale about the hare and tortoise race. She explained that the hare was not focused on the race; he was overconfident of his ability to run whereas the tortoise was trying his best to work hard to reach the finish line. The hare was very hasty in contrast to the dedicated and determined tortoise. Co Dung didn't conclude with the slow and steady bit that usually follows the fable, instead she inferred that as human beings we shouldn't simply rely on abilities and talents; carefulness and patience are the best policies for life. Finally she concluded by saying the students should never behave as the hare does.

If by some slim chance the students still hadn't figured out that this lesson could be applied to their own classroom Co Dung spelled it out for them. She emphasized that in context to their class, students can use this story to remember how important it is to come to school and be punctual. The school day starts at 7:00, and students should be present before class starts. Co Dung encouraged students to arrive early giving them a cushion in case the traffic is bad or a motorbike breaks down. If students come to school regularly they will be rewarded with new exercises and lessons from all the teachers. "Therefore going to school is very useful for you. Remember, the hare is lazy and the tortoise is hardworking. He will be successful in his study; you should imitate the tortoise."

Following the lesson my translator and I went around to different students and asked them what they had learned– Co Dung had been successful in getting her point across. One girl told us that two days ago she was late to school; after today’s lesson she will never be late again. She doesn’t want to be like the lazy hare, she wants to be known as a tortoise. Little Hiep said that he was happy to have learned such an important moral lesson. He understands that he should be a tortoise, not a hare. He wants to be hardworking and punctual, not like the hare who was “so lazy.” When students say they want to emulate the tortoise they are committing themselves to the school, fulfilling their roles as students. The students want to be like the tortoise because he has an impeccable work ethic, is obedient, well disciplined, and obeys the teachers. The lesson goes beyond teaching the students the importance of being timely but stresses following the rules and conforming to the identity of a dedicated student. When the students say they don’t want to be the hare, they are indirectly saying that they don’t want to break the rules; they want to be obedient.

*The role as a son or daughter:*

Besides obedience in the classroom, a good portion of the curriculum is fulfilling family roles and expectations. During “Tu Nhien Va Xa Hoi” or “Nature and Society,” I observed one of these lessons. Co Dung had students take out their books and flip it open to the lesson of the day. I peek over Minh’s shoulder to see four pictures, each with a clear moral and societal value embedded in them. Co Dung assigned each row of desks to one scene, and told them to discuss the picture with their desk partner. After two or three minutes had passed Co Dung called for the students’ attention. She had hung a blown-up picture of the page on the board and asked for a volunteer from each group to explain their picture. A student from the first group made his way to the front of the room and climbed up onto the stage. He took the yardstick into his hand

and simply pointed to the picture saying, “This boy is cleaning the table,” which is lucidly what the picture portrayed, a young boy clearing the dinner dishes. Co Dung asked the students, “Is that right– is the boy cleaning the table?” They all replied in unison, “Yes!” The following three groups had similar presentations. Group two’s image was of a young boy and his father working together on homework. Group three was just as straightforward, it was a young girl putting toys away, arranging them neatly onto a shelf as she cleaned the room. The last picture depicted a mother and daughter folding laundry. The completion of the descriptions led into a class discussion as to what chores the students do around the house to help their family. Co Dung asked students what he or she is responsible for in their house. More than a dozen children raised their hands and when called on contributed to the discussion of their responsibilities, “Cleaning the floor,” “Dusting the table,” “Feeding the chickens,” and “Working in the garden” were all shared with nods of approval from the class.

Co Dung was able to excite the children about doing household chores. The curriculum portrayed the importance of contributing, why their help is required around the house, and how students can participate in chores. Although to me it was obvious what the lesson was truly about, to the children the main lesson may have just been describing the pictures and discussing among classmates. It was the underlying lesson about owning responsibility and complying with their duties to help in the house that they will remember. As the allotted time for the lesson ran out Co Dung assigned the students homework– she had them flip their homework books open to a page with many illustrations. The children were instructed to think about these pictures and see if they can do them in their home. The page was filled with images of children feeding chickens, picking up toys, washing dishes, sweeping the floor, doing homework, and standing out among the others: a student jump roping. Next to each picture was a checkmark

box, where I can only assume the students would put a check in if they completed the task. The picture of the students jump roping at the bottom of the page signified that once they had completed their duties around the house they can return to their playful activities, rewarding themselves for their hard work.

I found it very surprising that the students were assigned to do household chores for homework. This is the first time I have seen the overlap between home and school, usually there is a very defined line separating the two. This lesson wasn't merely about teaching students to accept responsibility in the classroom, but was pushing them to take on more responsibility in their home. The enthusiasm Co Dung brought to the class when teaching the activities inspired the children to raise their hand and participate. She brought this energy that made doing chores something to be proud of, all the students were eager to share how they contributed around the house. It is through lessons like these when I realize just how much of an impact Co Dung has on the first graders— she is molding the students into little people that will obey and respect their society, not simply the classroom rules.

My last day of class was perhaps one of the most successful in terms of what I was looking for in my initial research— the moral values instilled in children. I found it even more interesting since it was one of Ho Chi Minh's lessons: be dutiful to your family— "*Gia dinh em.*" The lesson was structured similarly to the first dao duc I attended; displayed on the board was a poster divided into four different scenes. The first picture illustrated a set of parents helping their child with homework, the second picture displayed children playing in the park, and the third picture was of a family eating. The fourth picture sparked the greatest discussion among the class, it portrayed a disheveled looking boy selling newspapers all by himself. I will discuss

this more later, for the meantime I would like to focus on the three pictures that are centered on the interactions among family members.

After an introduction of the pictures Co Dung prompted the students to think about their own families. She called some students to the front of the class to talk about their family members and how they display their love. That is, what roles around the house do they take part in to show their affection? At this point of the class Co Dung hung another poster on the board, again divided into four pictures but this one had the same girl in each picture helping different relatives including her grandmother, her mother, and the family as a whole. The last picture was the girl at a toyshop with her mother, being rewarded for her help. The usual protocol unfolded, Co Dung asked the students to discuss the images and after a few minutes called on individual students to explain the pictures. When the class finished their descriptions Co Dung went further in depth, thoroughly explaining what is taking place in each illustration. For example: one of the pictures was the girl standing with a bike, talking with her mother. Co Dung explains that the girl is asking her mother if there is anything she can help with before she departs to visit a friend. The next image is of a grandmother spinning yarn at a loom. Co Dung tells the students that the young girl is asking the grandmother if she can help her in anyway, perhaps by getting her some water. There is no flexibility in the dialogue and scene that Co Dung is so vividly painting; she clearly and purposely is making students understand the importance of obeying their family, fulfilling their role as a son or daughter, and helping around the house. All these factors are the defining components of a son or daughter in Vietnam's society. Students are taught to behave accordingly with the role of the typical filial relationship.

The moral of the lesson was the proper way to show their love and respect for their family members through their helpfulness, dedication, loyalty, and loving actions. When they

properly fulfill their filial roles they will be rewarded, not always like the girl in one of the scenes who got a trip to the toyshop, but with love and support. Co Dung concluded the lesson with these words, “You children need to be obedient, and even then you shouldn’t make unnecessary requests,” referring to the fact that just for being a good daughter and son doesn’t mean they get toys. Being a good progeny means complying with the demands and needs of the family, even if it means they cannot spend time playing with their friends.

### **The role as a citizen:**

Another main focus in the first grader’s curriculum is nationality and pride. This can be seen in the portrait of Ho Chi Minh hanging in the front of the classroom, in the song sung myriad times throughout the day praising the fatherland, and in the numerous references to Ho Chi Minh, mostly regarding the five lessons of Uncle Ho: study well, work well, follow the rules, be honest, and keep a clean healthy body.<sup>6</sup> But perhaps most importantly the obedience to the nation is seen through chào cờ. Monday morning marks the start of a new week: last week’s struggles are forgotten, a new learning schedule is introduced, and students should feel recharged and focused after the weekend. Monday morning is also the time for each and every student of Le Loi Primary School to meet together for chào cờ, the flag ceremony. Chào cờ is a ceremony honored by every primary, secondary, and high school in Vietnam. Students and teachers gather together to salute the flag, sing the national anthem, recognize students for their achievements, review last week’s events, and discuss functions for the following week.

The first Monday morning I observed it was raining, so chao co had been postponed to a later time when I wasn’t present; however, the second Monday I was blessed with beautiful blue skies. I arrived at school around 6:50 a.m and followed the hoard of people into the courtyard, where both students and teachers were arranging red stools in rows. Once a majority of the

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<sup>6</sup> Duong Thanh. E-mail interview. 15 Nov. 2011.

students were settled on their stools one of the teachers stepped up to the microphone, asking the students to rise and salute the flag. She instructed the students to straighten their backs, stand tall, and to act serious. As the last few stragglers made their way to their classes' designated spot the teacher motioned to the older students standing behind her and they began to beat the drums. The sea of students broke into song— paying tribute to Vietnam by singing the national anthem. At the completion of the anthem students settled back down onto their stools and the ceremony continued. Students were called to the front of the courtyard to receive awards, certificates, and medals for their accomplishments in a competition with another primary school, and even more awards were passed out to students in recognition of academic excellence in a quizzing game. There were some general announcements and then suddenly everyone stood up, gathered their stools and returned to their classroom.

Walking away from the ceremony I felt as though starting the week with tribute to the nation symbolized the importance of learning to become a contributing citizen. When students work hard, push themselves academically, and excel in all aspects they will be serving their nation, and will be recognized for their achievements— making the nation proud. The chào cờ ceremony signifies the importance of nationality. The fact that the first order of business for a new week is meeting together and singing the national anthem represents the pride that each teacher needs to instill in her students. Nationality is a major contributing factor to the young children's academic expectations. Students aren't only required to attend the ceremony but to properly salute the flag, sing loudly, and act serious. Co Dung, and the school encourage students that the best way to show their pride is through respecting and obeying the laws of their country. Students are recognized for their academic and extracurricular success after singing the national anthem, perhaps to remind students that they can make their country proud. Respect

Vietnam, and make her proud through your hardwork and obedience in the classroom. It is the responsibility of each student to show their loyalty through complying with chào cờ.

I would now like to revisit the dao duc lesson that I mentioned earlier. A quick refresher: this lesson was focused on families and activities done in the family. Whereas the first three scenarios had a clear meaning, the picture of the unkempt vendor boy had me puzzled– what in the world was this supposed to portray? Co Dung explained that this boy had no family, either his parents were dead or divorced and so now he had to support himself by selling newspapers. She told the class that as citizens it was their job to help these people, to be sympathetic and loving towards them. This is yet another role in society students must fulfill, giving to others if they don't have the means of survival by themselves. In this instance Co Dung is reminding the students that not everyone in society is lucky enough to come from loving families, have good health, or have the necessary finances to support themselves. In this case it is their responsibility as citizens of Vietnam to be kind and caring to these people. As citizens they owe it to their country. This is yet another role they must conform to.

### **The Teaching Method**

Students aren't only taught moral values through curriculum, Co Dung very much believes in leading and teaching through exemplary behavior. Not only does Co Dung show up on time, speak clearly, dress properly, but she also teaches the class in an orderly and precise way. Co Dung stands on the stage at the front of the room, yardstick in one hand, a piece of chalk in the other, demanding the attention and obedience of all students. This rigorous and authoritarian style is most easily seen in classes like Vietnamese and mathematics. I attended four or five of the latter, watching the students learn addition and subtraction. To aid the students Co Dung uses different colored chalk to draw triangles, circles, and squares on the

board. The purpose of the lesson is to add up the shapes. This is typically what the board will look like during math class:

$$7 + 2 = 9 \quad \Delta \Delta \Delta \Delta \Delta \Delta \Delta / \Delta \Delta \quad 2 + 7 = 9$$

Co Dung stresses the importance that children know that what is done on one side can be done on the other. In a class with forty-four students the only way to get everyone to participate is by making them repeat the sentences over and over again as a class, as a row, in desk pairs, and as an individual. Co Dung will stand at the front of the class and point at a group and in unison they will all cry out “ $7 + 2 = 9$ ,  $2 + 7 = 9$ .” Other times they will go down the row of desks, one student standing up and reciting the line, immediately followed by student sitting in the desk behind them.

This monotonous learning behavior is the best method Co Dung can use to engage the entire class. By demanding that the students stand and recite the answer instead of allowing students to voluntarily participate Co Dung is making sure that students are paying attention and ready to contribute, for when she calls on them they must stand up and say what she wants to hear. There have been occasions when a student meekly stands up, unaware of what to say, and Co Dung will patiently wait. If after five seconds or so the student is still at a loss Co Dung will ask another student to help. Then she will look at the original student and make sure they understand by having them repeat. Then the next student in line will recite the answer. This strict, concise, and automatic learning routine is used so students do as the teacher says and participate in class. There is no way for a student to disobey Co Dung, if called on they must comply with the command and stand up and recite the answer.

This precise teaching method that I observed in mathematics became an issue in classes such as music, dance, and art where students are supposed to tap into their creative and

innovative abilities. The students are accustomed to having strict directions, so when asked to use their imagination they are at a loss. Students aren't taught to think on their own, but to think how they should behave according to the role they need to fulfill, resulting in a lack of creativity. Conformity is complying with the standards and accepting things the way they are and leaving them as is. Conforming is doing what everyone else is because that is what is "right." It isn't as though the teachers are purposely telling the students not to be creative, but it is through teaching methods, comments, and strategies that students innovative drive is replaced by their instinct to comply and conform. I agree that students need to be taught the importance of nationalism, being a family member, and obeying elders, but shouldn't they be allowed a little freedom when it comes to developing their own ideas?

One of the most interesting cultural norms I observed was the lack of creativity from the students, which I attribute to the strict teaching method. While observing in English class one day I saw just how unimportant creativity is. The students had finished learning the English words *net*, *balloon*, *bicycle*, and *jump rope* and were scribbling away in their English workbooks, coloring the objects and matching them to the correct word. There was also a small activity where students had to complete a maze that lead to the different objects– the maze was supposed to look like grass or shrubbery. I watched the students directly in front of me happily coloring and talking with their neighbors. Suddenly, I heard the teacher raise her voice; I looked up to see her standing over a desk talking to a small boy. With a select few words she firmly instructs him to do something differently in his workbook. The boy cast his eyes down at his desk, dropped the crayon in his hand, and picked up another. The teacher continued to walk down the aisle looking at other student's work. I immediately turned to my translator and asked her what had happened. She explained to me that the teacher wanted the boy to be more,

“reasonable.” I didn’t quite understand what this meant so we both got up and went to look at the boy’s workbook. Half of the grass maze had been colored red, but now his small hand was clutching a green crayon, slowly moving it back and forth over the paper filling in the remaining white spaces.

As I returned to my desk my mind was spinning– the boy had simply been coloring the grass red, yet the teacher had spoken in such a harsh tone, directing him to be more “reasonable.” Here comes one of the difficulties of not speaking the language, am I to think that instead of “reasonable” my translator meant “realistic?” She had further explained that what they were drawing had to match the real world, leading me to believe that the teacher had said, “Be more ‘realistic.’” Regardless of which word the teacher used– she wasn’t impressed with the boy’s unique choice in grass color. On my way back to my desk I began glancing at other students’ work. They had all colored the balloon red, the bicycle either blue or black, the net’s handle blue, and the grass green– the hue of the colors varied but generally speaking everyone’s coloring job was identical. These colors were the exact colors of the illustrations the teacher put on the board when teaching the new words; everyone besides this one boy had produced replicas of the teacher’s visuals. Why the boy decided to color the grass red– I do not know. But I do know that when the teacher told him to put down the red crayon she was discouraging creativity. This young boy simply was generating his own idea, and he was told that it was wrong, because grass can only be one color, the realistic or reasonable color: green.

The teacher is discouraging the boy to think on his own, to be original, and to explore new ideas. Making him pick up the green crayon doesn’t just change the color of the grass, but slowly chips away at his creative thought process, deterring him from generating new and original ideas. Why doesn’t this teacher want to foster creativity? If there is no positive

reinforcement on creativity at school, then where will children learn? I am not simply referring to creative as an artistic talent, but looking at the bigger picture– a child’s ability to think and act in a way that is considered original, unique, innovative, or alternative. With a teacher acting as a restraint it will be nearly impossible for children to explore and stimulate their creative thought process. This teacher is promoting conformity and imitation rather than innovative and creative thinking.

In the following days it became clear that the students actually couldn’t think on their own, perhaps because since the first day of school it has been drilled into their brains that they need to do as they are told and follow the directions and guidance of authorities. I was sitting in on a music class, the only class where the teacher brings a goofy attitude– that light hearted, fun loving spirit that is frequently seen in primary school teachers across America. Co Minh walked into the classroom with her portable radio, plugged it in and became clapping, shaking her hips, and smiling widely. The students stood up and joined in the singing, dancing, and smiling. When the song ended Co Minh taught the students a new song about a chicken. The students clapped along, quickly catching onto the new lyrics. Once Co Minh was confident in the student’s knowledge of the song she shared some exciting news– the students were all going to create their own interpretive dance and the best dance would become the designated dance for the chicken song. Students were encouraged to move to the music the way they thought best represented the song.

I sat in my chair very excited and curious to see what sort of moves the children would do to represent a chicken, but my hopeful excitement was quickly turned to disappointment. When Co Minh pressed play and the lively music filled the air, the children looked around skeptically, unsure of what to do. A few began to move their hands back and forth, hesitant to

make any bold or creative movements. Linh was the most open to the idea of creating her own dance. She enthusiastically took her left hand and shook it, almost like she was mockingly scolding someone while at the same time shaking her hips. She then did the same motion on the right side of her body and continued these simple movements. When the song had run its course only seven children had danced, not a sufficient number according to Co Minh. She started the song over again and told more children to join in. This time a few more students participated, most copying Linh's dance moves. Before the song has ended for the second time all the students were shaking their hands on one side, switching, and shaking their other hand. Lets revisit the goal of the assignment, "Come up with your own dance." The children are most definitely not doing that. This song is about a chicken; none of the children are doing any movements like a chicken, no arm flapping, head bobbing, or hand pecking. They are simply shaking their hands with a bit of pizzazz.

Co Minh does not seem surprised by the monotonous dance, in fact she invites three students from each desk row to come to the stage and perform the dance for their peers. The first students from group one walk to the stage. The music is played and they all do the same dance. When finished Co Minh exclaims, "Very beautiful." The next trio steps onto the stage, a girl and two boys. The music starts and the two boys begin to do the same exact dance the first group did. The girl however, does a new dance. She raises her hands to the air and brings them down, almost like the sun salutation. One of the boys stops what he is doing and looks at her, after a few moments of studying her movements he begins to do the same thing. At the chorus of the song the girl switches back to the scolding motion and the boy follows her lead. As the third group is getting out of their chairs to perform Co Minh says, "Okay group three, lets perform a little more enthusiastically." I was looking forward to seeing this group perform as

Linh, the student who invented the dance that everyone was now doing, was a member of the third group. I was curious if she would make a new dance, irked that everyone had copied her, or perform the original dance. She chose to do the latter. She did it with a little more zeal and energy than the other performances, but it was still the same dance.

When the music faded out Co Minh said, “Students need to feel the music, the performance is becoming monotonous. We need new ideas for the song. Let me show you.” She hit play, stepped onto the stage, and proceeded to perform a dance that actually resembled a chicken. When she completed her dance, she invited the children to join in with her. For the rest of the period the song is replayed over and over again as the students learned the dance by heart. Once Co Minh thought the students successfully knew all the motions and steps she began playing songs they already knew, and the students began to do the assigned dances to those particular songs. It was in this moment that it became clear that the dance they just learned would become the designated dance for the chicken song. In future classes when students heard this song they would all begin to move the way Co Minh just taught them.

The reason why the students couldn't come up with a dance is because all their other creative ideas are stifled like the infamous incident with the red grass. However, when the children failed to come up with their own dance, the teacher had one prepared and it appeared to me that she had the intentions to teach it to the children the whole time. Why would she ask them to make up a dance if she was ultimately going to teach her own interpretation of the song and make that the designated dance for the chicken song? Did she know that the students were not going to be able to come up with a dance on their own? If she had encouraged them to be more creative perhaps they would come up with something clever. It seems to be a vicious cycle, the teacher needs to present a dance because the students can't come up with one, but

every time the teacher gives them a dance she is defeating the purpose of letting the students use their imagination and sending them the message that she will have a dance regardless if they can think of one or not. Once again students are conforming, however in this instance I don't see this compliance in a positive light as it means that they cannot use their imagination to create their own dance.

As was clearly portrayed in the dancing situation, the students tend to copy one another in the classroom. Art and music class were some of the best times for me to observe because I could directly detect their conformity in their tangible work, such as drawings or dancing. This worked well with my study since I was very much concentrated on how students performed according to their teacher's directions. In instances when the students had no instruction they typically used their peers as an inspiration or perhaps more fittingly, a guide. Unfortunately with such a large class it is hard to see who starts drawing first, but I can see the students near me turning around to look at Trinh. She is a talented artist and Co Dung always seems drawn to her work, she usually displays it on the board, therefore the students use her work as a muse. On my second Monday in Le Loi school a new art teacher was introduced to the class. She told the first graders that this period they were going to free draw so she could observe all their different skill levels. With no instruction at all the students looked around, puzzled as to what they should do. They are so used to being told exactly what to draw, to make their objects in their pictures bigger, use brighter colors, and now they were told to do whatever they wanted– they didn't even have an inspiration.

I begin my usual lap around the classroom, peering over students' shoulders and seeing what they were working on. In one corner of the room all the students were drawing apple and orange trees like they were taught the previous week. Another cluster of four or five desks were

drawing houses. When I reached the front of the room there were three pairs of students drawing fish, and another bunch were drawing people. Generally speaking, clumps of students were drawing the same subject. One of the students decided to draw something and all the peers decided to copy that first student. With a lack of directions or commands in the classroom students are at a loss. They are so accustomed to someone telling them what to do every step of the way that they can't come up with ideas on their own.

## **Conclusion**

I am well aware that the topic I set out to research was broad, overwhelming, and difficult to locate an entry point. However, by deciding to focus solely on one set of moral values, obedience and conformity, I was able to thoroughly explore my research question through not only the curriculum, but the teaching method and atmosphere of the first grade classroom as well. With the completion of my observations in the classroom it was rather daunting to sift through my notes and make the decision in which direction to take this paper—there were so many different options. However, I feel confident that I conclude this study with an accomplished argument, that obedience and conformity are two of the most important moral values taught in a first grade classroom.

This essay has set out to show that through the strict atmosphere, the curriculum, and the method of teaching, children are taught the importance of obeying and conforming. Co Dung and her fellow teachers are relentless when it comes to creating a focused atmosphere, they don't allow students the opportunity to behave inappropriately, act immaturely, or distract their classmates. They keep the students in a controlled environment where they have no choice but to obey the teacher. In the act of obeying, they are conforming to their role as a student, that is meeting the prevailing standards and attitudes set by the teachers. The teachers don't only run

the classroom meticulously, but teach and lead through example. They are always acting in an orderly fashion, speaking loudly and clearly, encouraging the students, honoring the nation, and are timely. They conform to the standards of the classroom the same way they want the students to.

The method of teaching in Co Dung's classroom instills the values of obedience and regulation. Not only are students methodically called on in the classroom but also they are encouraged to be methodical in their work. Instead of fostering an environment of creativity and discussion, students are taught to be pragmatic because commonsensical citizens usually comply with the demands and needs of society— being pragmatic encourages compliance, not just in present day in Co Dung's classroom, but in all aspects of life. Students are taught to think logically, realistically, and follow others. From my own personal observations and experiences in Vietnam I have realized that a majority of citizens just go with the flow so to speak, especially in the University system. Students will be taught one value, fact, or idea and that is that, there is no chance for students to disagree or question the professor or lecturer. Occasionally professors ask a question, arising the opportunity to hold a discussion, but generally speaking course are lecture-based, not discussion based. I am in no way trying to belittle the professors I am simply trying to prove a point that in higher education the teacher is always right— the professor is omnipotent. This isn't teaching Vietnamese students to be critical thinkers, analytical writers, or engaged citizens. It is teaching them to listen, memorize, and repeat— to conform. Now, I am realizing it is not only the University system that implements these rigorous and straightforward methods, but all the institutions in the country, including the primary schools.

Brehm and Casline defined conformity as the tendency to change our perception, opinions, or behavior in ways that are consistent as group norms.<sup>7</sup> This is precisely what Co Dung is teaching—to comply with what society wants. Students aren't only taught to follow directions but to behave in certain ways that are already accepted by society. They are molded into the citizens that Vietnam wants running their communities: hardworking, obedient, and pragmatic. The students are taught the importance of showing respect by being obedient through following the directions of their authorities and respecting the commands of elders. Whether it be in the act of setting down a red crayon to pick up a green one to color grass, through studying the proper ways to behave and act in the home, or learning in a strict, uniformly kept environment, students are surrounded by and constantly encouraged to conform and obey.

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<sup>7</sup> Brehm, S.S. *Social Psychology/readings in Social Psychology*. [S.l.]: Houghton Mifflin, 1999. Electronic.

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