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Because of *thương*: Listening to the voices of Vietnamese early childhood educators

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Abstract

This paper explores the self-authoring of two early childhood educators in Vietnam's disadvantaged areas, Ha and Dong, to understand their marginalization and resilience in their daily practices. Guided by a Bakhtinian view, teachers' self-authoring is conceptualized as an ongoing process in which the teachers articulate authoritarian discourses, and integrate them with their ideas to develop their internally persuasive discourses—their own knowledge of themselves as professionals. Data was collected via semi-structured interviews and photo elicitation; and analyzed in parallel with Bakhtin's theoretical concept of self-authoring and the post-structuralist feminist approach. The findings represent the political, social, and gendered discourses addressing and being addressed by the preschool teachers. The study suggests that the compassion and devotion to work for children contribute to the teachers' making sense of their professional roles. This paper calls for a need to center the voices of Vietnamese early childhood teachers in policy-making, teacher training, and research practices, towards educational sustainability.

Keywords: early childhood educators, preschool education, professionalism, policy-making, self-authoring

Introduction

The construction of early childhood teachers' identities has been an issue in various settings, especially when this issue is situated in relation to professional challenges and social stigmas that marginalize their voices and experiences (Ailwood et al., 2022). Early childhood education (ECE) teachers are often considered less prestigious compared with teachers in the general schooling system, thus occupying one of the lowest positions in the educational job hierarchy (Tesar et al., 2017). Their identity as professionals is often questioned, their formal training is undermined by the public, and the working conditions are characterized by low wages, long hours, or lack of promotion opportunities (Yulindrasari and Adriany, 2023). Although the topic of ECE teacher identity has been well-researched in the scholarship, existing studies predominantly focus on Global North settings (e.g., Gibbons, 2020; Osgood, 2006), leaving a gap in understanding the challenges and resilience of ECE teachers in Global South Asian countries like Vietnam (Rushton

et al., 2023). This paper addresses this gap by exploring how two Vietnamese ECE teachers in disadvantaged areas (Areas 135), Ha and Dong (pseudonyms), navigated complex social and professional contexts through their self-authoring. Inspired by a post-structuralist lens, we did not label teachers as merely members of a marginalized group; rather, we learned to see and understand them as complex individuals with unique experiences that cannot be fully captured by any single label. In this paper, we combined Bakhtin's theory of dialogism and the post-structuralist feminist approach to investigate the multiplicity, fluidity, and complexity of the teachers' lived experiences within their socio-cultural contexts. Accordingly, we employed Bakhtinian concepts of authoritarian discourse and internally persuasive discourse to identify how the two ECE teachers articulated their professional identity amidst external discourses and developed their own internally persuasive discourse — their own knowledge of themselves and their work in ECE education—work of *thuong* (Vietnamese: understanding to compassion) as professionals. The post-structuralist feminist approach was employed to critically examine the intersectionality of gendered norms and social hierarchies that undervalue Vietnamese ECE teachers. We aim to not only highlight the vulnerabilities and marginalization these teachers face but also propose an alternative approach that acknowledges them as active agents in their profession. While our focus is on Vietnam, our findings offer insights applicable to ECE professionalism in other Southeast Asian contexts, an area underexplored in current literature (Rushton et al., 2023).

The paper starts with an overview of the literature on early childhood teachers' professional identities, and a brief introduction to preschool education in Vietnam, followed by the theoretical framework and methodology of the study. We then present the vignettes of two ECE teachers, Ha and Dong, then discuss the ways they negotiated the authoritarian discourses and internally persuasive discourses and gave voice to their work. The paper concludes with implications for policy-making, teacher training, and future research.

Early Childhood Teachers' Professional Identities

Over the past two decades, the concept of teacher professionalism has been recognized as a key contributor to the quality of early childhood education (ECE) (OECD, 2022). As a result, defining what it means to be a professional ECE teacher has become a central focus of public policies and research worldwide. This section provides a critical review of ECE teachers' professional identities across contexts through different theoretical lenses.

The structuralist view of teachers' professional identity often normalizes this concept as stability, coherence, and alignment with established standards and norms (Gracia et al., 2022). This lens promotes an idealized image of the "good" teacher, whose responsibilities are attached to caring, nurturing, and being defined and assessed by national policies, curriculum, and pedagogical guidelines. While such discourses offer teachers a sense of being qualified, they may simultaneously limit teachers' capacity to define themselves outside these narrow norms. Post-structuralist and dialogical scholars (e.g., Figueroa-Céspedes and Zamora, 2023; Osgood, 2021) have countered the fixed notions of professionalism in the structuralist lens and advocate for an understanding of ECE teachers' professional identity through their daily encounter with their work. Osgood (2021: 10) argued that professionalism needs to be sensed "from within" through ECE teachers' perspectives and embedded in their diverse cultural and socio-economic backgrounds. Taking a dialogical approach, Figueroa-Céspedes and Zamora (2023) identified how experienced Chilean kindergarten teachers navigated diverse resources from curriculum documents, colleagues' voices, and social norms of gender, labor, and education to enact themselves as

agentive educators. These studies emphasize the fluid, intersectional, and socially constructed nature of ECE teachers' professional identities that are shaped by their everyday moments, including their honors and troubles, suffering and compassion.

An important array of literature employs intersectionality between gender, class, race, and labor in conceptualizing ECE teachers' professional identities. From a feminist lens, studies in various contexts (e.g., Gould et al., 2023, Ailwood et al., 2022; Gibson, 2015; Poblete Nunez, 2018) reveal that ECE worldwide has long been associated with femininity, with teaching roles often being constructed as extensions of traditional mothering roles. This feminization of the profession leads to the fact that ECE teachers are frequently positioned within discourses of care rather than education, which undervalues their professional status in policy documents and broader society. Post-structuralist research also emphasizes how other multiple layers of teachers' social identities—such as race, class—intersect to produce different experiences of oppression. For example, Souto-Manning and Cheruvu (2016) noted how Black and working-class ECE teachers experience their professional identities differently from their White counterparts as they navigate additional layers of marginalization and discrimination. The intersectional lens thus highlights the complexity of professional identity formation, revealing how multiple forms of inequality intersect to shape teachers' experiences in nuanced ways.

Recent scholarship highlights the importance of incorporating Global South perspectives into research with ECE teachers' professional identities, a field traditionally dominated by Western-centric views. Historically, ECE teachers have often been portrayed as a homogeneous group characterized by White, middle-class, and English-speaking individuals, particularly in European scholarship (Adriany, 2024). This limited perspective overlooks the rich diversity and complexity that exists among ECE teachers globally. Researchers from the Global South have begun to challenge this narrative by emphasizing the varied socio-cultural contexts in which ECE teachers operate. The Global South authors (e.g., Poblete Nunez, 2018; Yang and Rao, 2021; Yulindrasari and Adriany, 2023;) argue that teachers' identities are deeply influenced by local cultural practices, social hierarchies, and gendered norms in education; all of which contribute to teachers' unique professional landscapes in their given contexts. Studies by Poblete Nunez (2018) and Yulindrasari and Adriany (2023) identified how social perceptions of ECE teaching as a woman's duty intertwined with local religious norms, shaping the role of ECE teachers as an act of self-sacrifice and service to God/Jesus in the Chilean and Indonesian contexts, respectively. Yang and Rao (2021), through interviews with preschool teachers in rural China, found that these teachers, often from low socio-economic backgrounds, struggled to defend their professionalism within a stratified context dominated by a Confucian power hierarchy. This body of work not only counters the monolithic representations of ECE teachers but also enriches the global understanding of teacher identity by bringing to light the ways in which local and global forces intersect in shaping professional identities. These few studies suggest that listening to the voices of teachers in different parts of the Global South is crucial in reconsidering the ECE development agendas sensitive to local teachers' conditions and capacity. An introduction to social, cultural, and educational contexts in Vietnam is provided next to introduce the contextual factors that shaped this study.

Early Childhood Teachers in Vietnam's Contexts

This section presents the relevant policy documents and public understanding that have shaped the professional lives of Vietnamese ECE teachers, especially those working in disadvantaged areas like Areas 135. In Vietnam, ECE refers to early childhood/preschool services for children aged 0-

6. Preschool teachers' professionalism is delineated by government regulations which set standards for their qualifications and competency. Historically, ECE in Vietnam primarily served as daycare (*trông trẻ, giữ trẻ*), with teachers being seen as caregivers during parents' working hours (Vu, 2021). Since *Đổi Mới* in 1986, Vietnam's economic reforms have transformed ECE significantly, recognizing it as a vital national policy (Prime Minister, 2017). The Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) issued Regulations on Professional Standards for Preschool Teachers No.26/2018/TT-BGDĐT in 2018, defining preschool teachers' professionalism as a "system of qualities and competencies that teachers need to achieve to fulfill their duties of nurturing, caring for, and educating children in ECE institutions" (MOET, 2018: 2). To improve the quality of preschool education provision, the New Education Laws in 2019 required ECE teachers to obtain at least a college-level degree rather than a secondary school diploma like before. A set of criteria were applied in all ECE settings to assess the professional levels of preschool teachers, based on their self-evaluation and school assessment. While these regulations partly reflect the government's attempt to professionalize the ECE workforce, they also fall under the "regulatory gaze" (Osgood, 2006), which demands that teachers work at the highest level of quality without taking into account their specific contexts.

In general, the Vietnamese government has made considerable investments to enhance teachers' professional development and their welfare, reflecting a commitment to improving the ECE sector. This commitment is evident in initiatives like the National Plan to develop ECE from 2018-2025 (Prime Minister, 2017) and Decree No.105/2020/ND-CP "Prescribing Early Childhood Education Development Policies" (in short: Decree 105) (Prime Minister, 2020), emphasizing ECE teacher roles in education. In 2018, The Prime Minister signed Decision No. 33/QĐ-TTCT to approve "Schemes for provision of training and advanced training for preschool teachers and managers during 2018-2025" to enhance the quality of professional development in the ECE sector. However, the mismatch between ministerial policymakers has led to a situation where preschool teachers, despite meeting the qualifications set by MOET, receive wages that are not commensurate with their responsibilities. In fact, preschool teachers' wages in Vietnam have always been a critical concern due to a lack of coordination and alignment between different ministries in policy making. The national budget allocated for preschool education, as proposed by the Ministry of Finance, is the lowest compared to those for primary and secondary education. The Ministry of Internal Affairs imposes salaries for ECE teachers that are the lowest in the education sector, without provisions for lunch allowances or overtime payments. This pay structure does not adequately reflect the specialized nature of preschool education (Ministry of Education and Training, 2023). MOET has acknowledged the challenges affecting preschool teachers. In 2023, Minister of Education and Training Nguyen Kim Son initiated a national forum to gather feedback from preschool teachers across the country and recommended that they be involved in policymaking (Nguyen, 2024). MOET (2023) has also proposed to the National Assembly that preschool teachers be classified as working in a hazardous occupation, making them eligible for special allowances. However, these proposals are still under discussion and have yet to gain consensus from other ministries, delaying their implementation.

The government has made significant efforts to improve ECE quality in socio-economically disadvantaged areas. The most important project is Program 135, initiated in 1998, targeting infrastructure, healthcare, and education in remote regions for ethnic minorities (Ha, 2009). Following this program, preschool teachers who permanently work in Areas 135 receive special subsidies (indicated as much as an additional 30–50% of their monthly salary) for a

maximum period of three years (Karlidag-Dennis et al., 2020). While the special subsidies are proposed to encourage preschool teachers to remain in the profession, they are only available within three years. After this period, discontinuing these allowances often leads teachers to seek employment in more favorable regions or change their profession, exacerbating the severe shortage of teachers in these disadvantaged areas (Van, 2023). Although ECE teachers in Areas 135 are portrayed in Decree 105 (Prime Minister, 2020) as key to national educational transformation, the implemented policies issued by the Ministry of Home Affairs and Ministry of Finance are not in pair with teachers' sacrifices and hardships. In reality, they have long working hours of up to 9-12 hours per day. Furthermore, no national policy stipulates a provision of public housing and travel support for Area 135 teachers who must reside in remote campuses during weekdays, nor is there an allowance to compensate for their extra work due to an extreme shortage of staff, or financial incentives for their welfare and professional development (MOET, 2023). The wellbeing and agency of preschool teachers in disadvantaged areas, hence, are still in question.

The public understanding of ECE and ECE teachers, as highlighted in MOET's (2023) report, influences preschool teachers' perceptions of their profession. Preschool education is not mandatory in Vietnam's educational system, which might be interpreted by the public as a lack of academic focus and thus less important for children's future (Tran, 2020). ECE teachers are often thought of as having low professionalism and qualifications (Neylon and Le, 2021), and the nature of their job is similar to a caregiver. In Vietnam, ECE is also predominantly a female profession (MOET, 2023), thus hindering recognition of teachers' contributions because of the cultural norms that historically undervalue women's professional roles (Vo and Ha, 2021). Vietnamese ECE teachers frequently grapple with emotional exhaustion, excessive workloads, information overload, overwhelming responsibilities, and physical burnout. As a result, they may find it difficult to raise their voices in both policy-making and public spaces.

Theoretical Framework

This paper draws on Bakhtin's theory of discourses and self-authoring and post-structuralist feminist approach as the framework. From a Bakhtinian view, a discourse is orchestrated by different social standpoints, or "voices" that contain ideological echoes of the contexts and affect an individual's making sense of themselves and others (Bakhtin, 1981, 1984). Discourses exist in unfinalized dialogues of voices as they always travel "from one mouth to another, from one context to another context, from one social collective to another, from one generation to another generation" (Bakhtin, 1984: 293). Bakhtin differentiated two main types of discourses: authoritarian discourse and internally persuasive discourse. Authoritative discourse "is located in a distanced zone, organically connected with a past that is felt to be hierarchically higher. With authoritative discourse, an individual uses other persons' words in dialogue by "reciting by heart" (Bakhtin, 1981: 341). Authoritative words, representing the power of "the fathers" (Bakhtin, 1981: 342), are discourses of authority and monologic truth that normally come from authorities. For this paper, authoritarian discourse can be found in the words of legal documents, policies, school rules, social norms and stereotypes of early childhood educators in Vietnam. In contrast, internally persuasive discourse is "backed by no authority at all and is frequently not recognized by society" (Bakhtin, 1981: 342). Through internally persuasive discourses, speakers can decide the ways to articulate others' words, which Bakhtin (1981: 341) called "retelling in one's own words." While

authoritative words imply authorities, internally persuasive discourse reflects the person's making sense of themselves and the social world.

Bakhtin posited that identities are constructed in discourses or voices. He described the construction of identities via the concept of the "authoring self" (Bakhtin, 1993: 40). From Bakhtin's perspective, the self is dialogic, meaning that people perceive themselves in relation to their comprehension of otherness, and that "I cannot do without the other; I cannot become myself without the other; I must find myself in the other, finding the other in me" (Bakhtin, 1981: 185). In other words, the construction of self and otherness exist in an interconnection of diverse voices with others, since "existence is always co-being" (Iddings et al., 2005: 31). Authoring the self, or self-authoring, is an ongoing dialogue in which people articulate authoritarian discourses, integrate these voices with their own ideas, to develop their internally persuasive discourses, or their own knowledge of themselves, people. In other words, an individual always lives in a discursive dialogue in which they find different ways to respond to authoritarian discourses: accepting or denying, following or resisting, repeating or modifying, etc. The responses to authoritarian discourses and the process of developing internally persuasive discourses occur continuously in every interaction and relationship, leading to people's plural and interdependent roles. Thus, self-authoring is a fluid and intersectional process.

The post-structuralist feminist lens in teacher identity research challenges traditional, fixed notions of identity by emphasizing the fluid and socially constructed nature of gender and power dynamics (Saavedra and Pérez, 2018; Yelland et al., 2021). This perspective enables a critical examination of how teachers' identities are shaped and reshaped through the intersecting influences of gender, class, labor, and societal expectations (Carbado et al., 2013). Taken together, we integrate the post-structuralist feminist approach into Bakhtin's theory of self-authoring as the two analytical lenses for this paper. We aim to highlight the multiplicity and intersectionality in teachers' self-authoring processes by unraveling the authoritarian discourses imposed on them as ECE teachers and their internally persuasive discourse in making sense of themselves as professionals.

Methodology

This article derives from a larger project that examines influential factors on Vietnamese ECE teachers' professionalism that involves eight teachers. For this study, a qualitative dialogical approach (Frank, 2012) was employed to identify how the ECE teachers responded to discourses to author themselves as professionals. Since the focus of the dialogical approach is the participants' perspectives, using this approach enables us researchers to learn "to speak with a research participant rather about him or her" (Frank, 2012: 3) while maintaining openness between us and our participants. A consent form was sent to the participants prior to the interviews. To ensure their confidentiality and anonymity, we used pseudonyms and removed all identifiable information. In this paper, we purposely featured the stories of only two teachers, Ha and Dong, because their narratives richly represent the ways they responded to dominant discourses of policy documents and the social stereotypes in their work environments. They both come from the remote and disadvantaged zones in provinces in Vietnam with a high population of ethnic minority people (Areas 135). They have been working as early childhood teachers for more than 10 years before working as school leaders of two public kindergartens in Areas 135.

The primary data source for this paper came from a semi-structured interview conducted by the first author with each participant that lasted one hour and half. Follow-up communication via phone calls and messages were also used to collect additional information. We also asked the participants to select photos relevant to their professional lives and talked about them during and after interviews. The first author also recorded fieldnotes as an additional source of data and for afterwards reflection. Following a dialogical approach that allows researchers to examine self-authoring via multimodal storied forms (Iddings et al., 2005), we made use of all the data sources (interview, informal conversations, photos, follow-up exchanges, and field notes) as diverse forms of utterances (Bakhtin, 1993) to investigate the teachers' self-authoring.

The research team includes three authors with various experiences in education. The first author, a Vietnam-based researcher working in the ECE sector, was the primary contact with the participants and collected data. The second author, a Vietnamese researcher in education based in the UK; and the third author, a New Zealander professor in ECE, collaborated with the first author to conduct data analysis and write the paper. We started by reading the interview transcripts and fieldnotes, analyzed photos, and recorded our personal thoughts to get familiar with the data in all forms. Afterwards, we examined the authoritarian discourses and internally persuasive discourses emerging in the teachers' narratives and their self-authoring process as ECE professionals. Through a post-structuralist feminist lens, the teachers' responses were analyzed in relation to contextual factors including their local settings, relevant policy documents, and Vietnamese social and cultural norms of ECE teaching, to identify the intersectionality of gender, labor, and power discourses embedded in their narratives. We went back and forth between their narratives and the literature of institutional, social, and cultural factors in Vietnam to understand the teachers' self-authoring.

Findings

This section presents two vignettes of two ECE educators, Ha and Dong. Each vignette starts with a brief introduction of the educators and her settings, followed by our identification and interpretation of discourses attached to their profession and identity as ECE teachers.

Ha's vignette of self-authoring: 'what they say about me' vs 'what I do for the children'

Ha is a forty-year-old educator living in a mountainous province in Northwest Vietnam, where nearly 90% of the population are ethnic minorities. It is also one of the provinces with the lowest GDP rate in the country. Since 2006, Ha has worked for 12 years as an ECE teacher and 6 years as an ECE school leader. She has been working at Cao Linh Preschool since 2022. Located in one of Hà Giang province's most remote and impoverished areas, Cao Linh preschool spans five campuses spread across different communes, each 20-30 kilometers apart. During the rainy season, travel between campuses involves navigating hilly, slippery roads, and crossing streams and rivers without national highways. She and most teachers live in communes, staying in dormitories and returning home only on weekends and public holidays. Over 90% of the preschool's children are from Hmong and Dao ethnic families whose primary occupation is farming.

'Preschool teachers only know how to sing and dance and teach nothing'

Throughout the interview and follow-up conversations, Ha described her emotions when hearing others' words about the ECE profession. She started our conversation with a recognized contrast between what is stipulated in policies and the stigmas she encountered in everyday interactions with the district leaders and community people.

Ha: According to policy and official documents, preschool teachers should be very respected. But what actually happens, what we see from the view of district leaders, other educational levels or social communities is that preschool teachers are not appreciated. For example, people say that being a preschool teacher is a low-level job, or that you work as a preschool teacher if you can't do any other job.

Author 1: How do you know?

Ha: They said directly to us sometimes. A male senior leader in our district once said that our female preschool teachers were very ignorant and incompetent. These words make us feel extremely upset. Can you imagine when you're on a bus and are asked about your job, you don't want to answer? I just said I worked in the education sector and as a teacher. There are times I feel very embarrassed when introducing myself as a preschool teacher because everyone thinks it is a low-level job. In their eyes, preschool teachers only know how to sing and dance and teach nothing at preschools.

There are different voices in Ha's narrative. While Ha agreed that the words in policy documents portrayed a preschool teacher as a high-esteemed and important profession, the voice of others, here the community and district leaders who were not present in the interview but whose words were visible in Ha's account, reveals serious underestimation of ECE teachers' work and competence, likening them as entertainers who "only know how to sing and dance." The words of a male district leader that female preschool teachers were "ignorant and incompetent" reflect the authoritarian discourse of femininity in which preschool teachers' work was associated with traditionally feminine traits, such as entertaining and caring. Then, working as a ECE teacher was the option for people having a low level of competence and "can do nothing else". Such words from the public indicate an authoritarian discourse that undermines the social status of ECE teachers and downplays the skills and added value of ECE work, framing it as women's work at the bottom in the occupation rank. Later, Ha recalled her failed attempts to "defend" herself and "change others' beliefs". Once, when she talked to a male district leader about eliminating social biases against ECE teachers, he quoted a line from a Vietnamese song, "one small sparrow cannot make a spring" (*một cánh én nhỏ chẳng làm nên mùa xuân*), as a metaphor to ridicule her efforts, affirming that she, like a small sparrow, "could not change anything". Such words negate Ha's attempts to challenge the gendered stigmas and reinforce the 'singular truth' that female ECE teachers are unworthy and unprofessional. Ha continued with her explanation of inequity in ECE teacher's wage policy, pointing out the linkage with the authoritarian discourse.

The Minister of Education and Training said that preschool teachers worked very hard. And in many conferences and forums organized by MoET, preschool teachers have shared a lot about their responsibilities and that the current payroll is not on par with their work. Our job is very intense. On paper, we work eight hours a day, but in reality, we often work up to 10 hours without a lunch break. However, our salaries are always the lowest in the education sector. The Minister, in his discussion in the National Assembly, promised an increase in salary for preschool teachers, but until now we still have not seen new policies in effect. Preschool teachers' salaries are still the lowest. And you know, a male leader in our district said that 'female preschool teachers don't do

anything and should not expect to be paid.’ Even the husband of one ECE teacher, who is also an official in the District Finance Department, when hearing our conversation about this issue, gave a comment that preschool teachers’ work is so minimal but you demand high salaries’. These words make us feel very sorry for ourselves. Even the husband of a preschool teacher, who is also a state official, can say such words.

This interview excerpt reveals a contrast between the authoritarian discourses at the national and local levels. The authoritarian discourse at the national level (i.e., in the Minister's words in national forums) affirmed the important contribution of ECE teachers in education and society and acknowledged they deserved higher pay grades. Meanwhile, the authoritarian discourse at the local level, predominated by male figures (a district leader, a teacher's husband and also a local official), dismissed these contributions. This local authoritarian discourse perceived preschool teachers as women’s work with no value, thus, delaying the implementation of a new wage policy for ECE teachers as Ha recounted. The teachers’ hard work (high-intensity, unpaid overtime) was completely ignored at worst or taken very lightly at best. From a post-structuralist feminist perspective (Poblete Nunez, 2018), the local discourse describes social hierarchies in which a female teacher, like Ha, was stratified by male voices. Moreover, these words reveal an intersectionality between gender and labor (Osgood, 2006) addressing the preschool teaching within femininity and, hence, the economic devaluation of labor. Although these words were not written in documents, they represented authoritarian discourses that hindered the teachers’ voices.

‘Work for children’

Ha’s internally persuasive discourse is embedded in her response to the authoritarian discourses. Despite the underappreciation of her work, Ha realized there was “no need to be recognized by district leaders” (interview). Rather, she “put bad experiences aside” (interview) to focus on the difficulties that the children, teachers, and parents in her preschool grappled with and aimed to work with and for them. When asked about her motivation to become an ECE teacher, Ha mentioned her compassion for the disadvantages of teachers, parents, and children in her local community. She several times used the Vietnamese word “*thuong*” (care, understanding for compassion) to describe her feelings when visiting remote preschool campuses, and witnessing the challenges of teachers and children in their everyday lives. “*Thuong*” empowered her to get through the hardship, “think[ing] about her own children who are more fortunate than the preschoolers”, and motivating her to “improve the conditions of teachers and children” (interview). Her care and compassion were not only represented in words, they were transformed into actions when she found donors from her personal network, and raised funds for children's daily essentials (e.g., food, clothes, books) and campus renovation projects. She shared one recent photo via Zalo chat (an instant messaging application popular in Vietnam) with the first author, to further explain why she wanted to “work for children” (Ha, informal conversations).



Figure 1: Ha's photo (Photo used with participant's consent)

In Ha's explanation, the confectionery in the picture was in fact donated by one National Cemetery in her preschool's neighbourhood. Every day, visitors to the Cemetery place flowers and confectioneries on the altars of soldiers who died in wars. Ha asked the authorities of the Cemetery to donate confectioneries to her preschool on the occasion of Children's Day on 1st June so that they could have some extra sweets and biscuits. The photo, supporting Ha's narrative, demonstrates her self-authoring as a compassionate educator who chose to seek every opportunity to improve the lives of the children. Ha's story represents her internally persuasive discourse of her working as a profession of *thuong*, enabling her to respond to her hierarchical professional contexts. While she could not find a dialogical space to officially negotiate with district leaders' authoritarian discourse, she learned to fight her own battles and acted with care and compassion for the children and her profession.

Dong's story of self-authoring: 'what they say about me' vs 'what I do to change them'

Dong is a forty-four-year-old educator working and living in a mountainous province with a high population of ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands of Vietnam. After three years of working as a teacher, Dong was appointed as the school leader in several public preschools in different Communes of Areas 135 in her province. Since 2019, she has been working as the school leader in Vành Khuyen Preschool. This preschool is situated in a commune with the highest poverty rate of the province. There are six campuses belonging to the preschool, each campus is more than 20 kilometers far from the other, surrounded by mountains, streams, and rivers. More than 70% of

the children are Jarai people, and their parents mainly work in cassava fields and rubber plantations.

'Doing a poop-cleaning job'

In her interview, Dong recounted other's words about her profession which came from the local people, district leaders, and her close family members. Dong acknowledged the government's efforts to provide subsidies for children and teachers from disadvantaged areas like her preschool, such as monthly additional salaries. She, however, emphasized that the salaries were "not yet satisfactory compared with the hardship" because teachers would have to "travel long distances, work overtime, and come home late every day" (interview). Additionally, teachers in these areas would only receive government subsidies for three years. After that, they would no longer have financial support from the government, leading to teacher attrition in disadvantaged regions (Dong, informal conversation).

Dong admitted that when she first started working in Gia Lai, the enrollment rate of children was "quite low" as parents and even district leaders did not fully value preschool education. Farmer parents tended to take their children to the fields rather than sending them to preschools. Similar to Ha's experience, Dong's recollection of district leaders' and community people's words was that female ECE teachers "only know to sing and dance". These words, again, indicate an authoritarian discourse that ECE teachers work as caregivers and entertainers rather than educators. Dong recalled a past conflict with her father-in-law regarding her choice of career as an ECE teacher. He did not allow Ha to pursue this work because working as a preschool teacher, in his view, was "doing a poop-cleaning job". Impacted by Confucianism, men have historically held a dominant role in decision-making processes in Vietnamese families (Do et al., 2023). Her father-in-law's disapproval with sarcasm and disdain implies a local authoritarian discourse inferiorizing women's decision-making in their work. Inside these words is also an intersection between gendered norms and social hierarchies. From the other' view, the ECE profession is a low-status manual job, attached to women's inherited caring work that requires no academic training and professional investment.

'I am always proud'

Despite the disrespectful comments about her profession, in the interview and follow-up communication, Dong saw herself as a respectful ECE teacher. Her internally persuasive discourse was developed by her recognition of the "extreme importance" of ECE and her role in preparing the foundational stages for children's future.

Author 1: How did you feel about the misconceptions of others, especially your father-in-law's words of preschool teachers as doing poop-cleaning jobs in the past?

Dong: Sad, I felt sad, but it motivated and strengthened me.

Author 1: How did these words strengthen you?

Dong: It strengthened me to participate and contribute to better educating and caring for children.

Author 1: And now, how does your father-in-law think about your work?

Dong: When he moved to live with my family in Gia Lai, observed my everyday hardship, recognized preschool parents' respect for me, and witnessed my achievements like my district and provincial awards for being an excellent teacher, he changed his mind. He says that it is a respectable career.

This interview excerpt highlights the development of Dong's internally persuasive discourse in which the misconceptions of her work transformed into motivations "to contribute to better educating and caring for children" and prove the values of the ECE career. In the interview, she mentioned her pride in her long-term efforts to build trust and good relationships with children, their parents, and the district leaders. For example, she learned simple greetings in children's home language (a minority language) to communicate with them, visited every child's home to convince their parents to enroll them in preschool rather than taking them to the fields, and served meals for children at preschools at minimal cost. She proposed strategies to the district leaders to increase the enrollment rate of children by providing financial support for parents. Her initiatives and efforts drew the leaders' attention to ECE. Similar to Ha, Dong's attempt came from "*thuong*" to the challenges that the children and their families faced. For Dong, "*thuong*" was practically transformed into "actions that benefit the children" (interview).

Dong then talked about the positive changes in people's understanding of ECE work. When local people showed some negative attitudes towards her job, she explained to them that "when children and their parents meet me outside or inside school, they always say "Hello" to me, which shows their respect for me" (interview). When she decided to move to her current preschool, the district leader where her previous preschool was located showed their regrets, saying "if I had known you moved, I would have never let you go, you must stay here to help us for some more years." Dong was also happy when her father-in-law now held a different view of ECE work "as a respectable career." From a Bakhtinian view, Dong used pragmatic actions to purposely create dialogical spaces in which she negotiated the meanings of her work and demonstrated the values of ECE with different interlocutors (i.e., children's families, district leaders, her father-in-law). When asked about her feelings about being an ECE educator, she immediately responded, "I am always proud" (interview). She shared with us during a follow-up occasion one photo that showed her pride in her work.



Figure 2: Dong's photo (Photo used with participant's consent)

In this photo, the children and Dong were standing in a booth in her preschool's Lunar New Year Fair. The children gave her the agricultural products (seen in picture: corn, bananas, black beans, sweet potatoes) that their parents donated to this special event. As Dong explained, the children gifted her their home products as a way to show their love to her. Their love was "the most important evaluation of my hard work" (Dong, informal conversation). This photo, coupled with Dong's narrative, illustrates her pride to be an ECE teacher who is loved. This pride in being loved is an internally persuasive discourse formed by her everyday efforts to accompany and support the children and their families, her negotiation of the meanings of her work with people around her, and the actions to change others' words about ECE teachers.

Discussion

The findings from this paper describe the marginalization and resilience of Vietnamese ECE educators in their self-authoring process as professionals, which has been currently untapped in research. The vignettes highlight how dominant authoritarian discourses, including those related to politics, social norms, and genders, intersect and impact the ECE profession in Vietnam.

First, we argue that the ECE teachers are placed in a vulnerable position in Vietnam's political discourses. The two vignettes reveal inconsistency between ministries in making policies related to preschool teachers. On one hand, in policy documents by the Vietnam Government and MOET (e.g., Decree 105, National Education Plan) as presented in the literature review, ECE teachers are considered change agents who occupy an important position in the national education system. Professional training and development for ECE teachers is also a national priority to enhance the quality of preschool education provision. Preschool teachers' wellbeing and agency are promoted through a national forum initiated by the Minister of Education and Training. These policies and MOET's guidance are evident in the government's attempts to emphasize the importance of ECE for young children and shift the discourse of ECE teachers from being babysitters who provide daycare to ECE teachers as educators (Vu, 2021). On the other hand, as shown in our analysis, the current wage and welfare policy for teachers in Areas 135 that were decided by other Ministries (Ministry of Finance, Ministry of Internal Affairs) fails to recognize preschool teachers' significant caring and teaching responsibilities and their physically and mentally intense job of long working hours without overtime pay. Such discrepancies in policies send mixed messages about the values and professionalism of the ECE profession to local authorities and the public. In our study, Ha's differentiation between the Minister's words and the current wage policy, in reality, confirms the disparity between what is stated in national policies and what has been implemented for preschool teachers at the local level. This finding aligns with prior research in Global South Asian countries (e.g., Yang and Rao, 2021; Yulindrasari and Adriany, 2023), showing that inconsistent policy implementation and a lack of inter-ministerial collaboration have led to inequity and undervaluation of preschool teachers.

Second, we contend that the pervasive authoritarian discourses against ECE educators imply an intersection between social and gender norms of preschool education. It is important to note that as a Confucian heritage culture, the teaching profession in Vietnam is upheld as noble, and teachers are highly respected (Tran, 2020). Nevertheless, Ha and Dong's struggles to gain recognition and respect demonstrate a contrasting fact. Their narratives reveal a social misconception of ECE as merely a site for caregiving practices provided by female caregivers or babysitters, rather than by teachers. This perception leads to the work of preschool teachers being low-paid and undervalued, reinforcing the global view of ECE teachers' vulnerability in their profession (Ailwood et al., 2022). Moreover, the authoritarian discourses in both vignettes are represented by words that came from men. They are male state officials in the districts and provinces whose power included making decisions, setting local guidelines and managing daily operations of ECE schools and daily activities of ECE teachers like Ha and Dong, and the teachers' male family members (the husband of an ECE teacher in Ha's narrative, and Dong's father-in-law). These masculine voices, or the male gaze, allude to the gender role attitudes towards female ECE teachers, which has its root from the traditional gender norms and labour distribution in Vietnam (Do et al., 2023). Ha's narratives particularly highlighted how male officials interpreted the delay

in the national wage policy as a result of their undervaluation of ECE work. This undervaluation, in turn, stems from the gendered norms that view ECE teachers as an extension of women's domestic roles rather than as professionals (Vo and Ha, 2021). These discourses reveal an intersection between policy interpretation and implementation, and the gendered norms surrounding ECE teachers in Vietnam. Concurring with Powell et al. (2020) and Gibbons (2020), we contend that this discourse signifies the femininity of ECE in Vietnam. Furthermore, femininity hinders teachers from raising their voices in their workplace (Vo and Ha, 2021) as in Ha's vignette when her proposal to a district leader to develop a more holistic understanding of ECE was rejected. This policing act through the denial of Ha's voice to defend her profession could run the risk of "[refusing] the entire early education sector" (Gibbons, 2020: 363). Given the local contexts of Ha and Dong, an Area 135, it is important to note that social structures of rural mountainous villages and families still reinforce a patriarchal system that sees women as subservient to men's power (Do et al., 2023). The ECE profession, as closely attached to the image of female teachers giving care to children, is arguably unappreciated because of the gender factor. In Gibbons' (2020: 364) words, "babysitting may be an exemplar of the silencing of women".

Despite the intersectional dominance of the authoritarian discourses, Ha and Dong held different perceptions of the impacts of these disruptive discourses on their professional identity. Ha's dedication to volunteering work to improve the education facilities for the children and teachers showcases the vitality of teachers' mindfulness and compassion in transforming dominant discourses and defining their profession (O'Hara-Gregan, 2022). Dong, meanwhile, turned the authoritarian discourses into motivation to resist and defend herself as professional, which links with previous studies of teachers' resilience as a cause for educational change (Figuerola-Céspedes and Zamora, 2023; Saavedra and Pérez, 2018). Ha and Dong both chose to stay focused on working for children with a sense of *thuong* (understanding to compassion) to challenge dominant authoritarian discourses and define themselves as educators. *Thuong* as a highly emotional value is core in their self-authoring as ECE teachers. The cases of Ha and Dong feature teachers' professionalism going beyond national standards and assessment and being constructed through compassion and dedication to children from ethnic minorities. In compassion, teachers construct a sense of "professionalism from within" (Osgood, 2021: 6). Although their work of *thuong* might not be compensated by additional salary but by home-grown corn, sweet potatoes, or black beans that the children and their families gifted them, the teachers were happy with the impacts they made, assisting the government in expanding children's access and participation in ECE, especially in regions like Areas 135. In Dong's words, "I am proud."

One key idea in the dialogical theory is not to finalize any person within solo-truth or monological terms (Bakhtin, 1981). Through listening to teachers' stories, our purpose is to interpret them neither as victims of authoritarian discourses nor heroes of invisible sacrifices. Instead, their narratives encourage us to see them as dialogical human beings who lived with but not being intimidated by these discourses, who were vulnerable but using compassion and everyday good actions to author themselves as dedicated educators of children.

Conclusion

This paper reports on a dialogic inquiry into the self-authoring process of two ECE educators in low socio-economic areas in Vietnam, Areas 135. From the lens of self-authoring, the study illustrates the dominant authoritarian discourses that devalue the ECE teachers and their work, and

the internally persuasive discourses that the teachers developed to embrace their resilience and commitment to their daily work for the children and social status of their profession, work of *thuong*. The teachers also authored themselves as agentic professionals and found ways for their voices to be heard. Findings from this paper feature how marginalization can be transformed into educators' power of empathy and effort to work for the sake of children.

So far, no substantial studies have been done to explore the experiences of Vietnamese ECE teachers, with a particular focus on those working in disadvantaged areas. The findings of this study, therefore, provide invaluable insights for policy makers, provincial authorities, and practitioners in the education sector. The paper calls for the need to deconstruct the education hierarchy that disadvantages ECE training and thus the profession, and disrupts the socially constructed narratives of ECE teachers as incompetent and unworthy. It stresses the importance of recognizing ECE teachers' identity as educators who are qualified to do their jobs, rather than female entertainers or caregivers during day time so that parents can work. We suggest that the dialogical spaces (Bakhtin, 1984) in national and local platforms can be a starting point to enable Vietnamese ECE teachers to raise their voices and exercise their agency. A bottom-up approach to policymaking with sensitivity that takes into account preschool teachers' specifiable contexts (Poblete Nunez, 2018) can be helpful to ensure gender equity and empower their democratic participation in the political space, which will also help to eradicate gender biases against female ECE teachers. Further, relevant policies for ECE teachers (wage and welfare policy, labor laws) need to be made consistently with strong advocates and commitments from different governmental sectors. In-service training should also be implemented not only to enhance teachers' skills and knowledge but also to raise awareness among local leaders, educational administrators, and parents of children of ECE teachers' working conditions, wellbeing, and agency. Lastly, ECE teachers' well-being should be more visible in curricular and policy documents to decrease staff burnout and high turnover rate, which is a common issue in ECE in Vietnam.

For (in)conclusive thoughts, we want to recall Ha's sharing about the district leader's words cited from a famous Vietnamese song, "one small sparrow cannot make a spring." The following sentence in the song is, "inviting many sparrows to come together with the warming wind." From Bakhtin's (1984) view, one word is always unfinished as it leads to further response, a cause for newly reborn discourses. We understand that this paper cannot stand as "many sparrows" to make "spring", or to tackle all authoritarian discourses. However, it serves as a beginning step to challenge the dominant perception of ECE educators and ECE profession in Vietnam, calling for a change in view and attitudes from policymakers and the public, and setting the foundation for subsequent research of and with Vietnamese ECE educators. We hope future studies will follow this line of inquiry to advocate for Vietnamese ECE teachers' identities and their professionalism.

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