

Vietnam needs government priority for sexual diversity education

Peter Dankmeijer, May 10, 2013



On 2 May, about 70 representatives of civil society organizations in Vietnam convened in Ha Noi to discuss how sexual diversity could be best integrated in mainstream policies. The core of the analysis made was that despite all the initiatives of both the government and civil society, it is a challenge to properly implement life skills education including attention

to sexual diversity. The main recommendation was that it would be welcomed if the government takes leadership and make such implementation, including ‘dealing with diversity’ a clear priority.

The strategy workshop was convened by CCIHP (The Center for Creative initiatives in Health and Population) in cooperation with the Sexual Rights Alliance Vietnam (SRA) and The Institute for Studies of Society, Economy and Environment (iSEE) in cooperation with GALE, the Global Alliance for LGBT Education. There have been some small scale initiatives in Vietnam to educate about sexual diversity, like publishing a book with stories, organizing meetings and starting cooperation between these organizers, LGBT groups and universities. Even teacher training institutions and the institute for curriculum development are intending to join this starting coalition. However, it is not clear, apart from a few pilot projects, how to cooperate on a more joint strategy. The offer of GALE to facilitate a workshop on strategy therefore came a just the right moment.

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The participants in the workshop came from a wide variety of backgrounds: LGBT grass roots organizations, other civil society organizations, some UN bodies represented in Vietnam, universities, teacher trainers, curriculum developers and people who had functions in the Ministries of Health and the Ministry of Labor: Ministry of Labor, Invalids and Social Affairs (MOLISA). The Ministry of Education could regrettably not be present.

There was a consensus among the participants that Vietnam in principle is a progressive country, with a communist government aiming to increase the increase of education by not only offering technical knowledge, but shifting the focus to life skills education. In this view, there are a lot of opportunities to implement comprehensive sexual education and attention on a pedagogy that teaches how to deal with diversity (including sexual diversity). One of

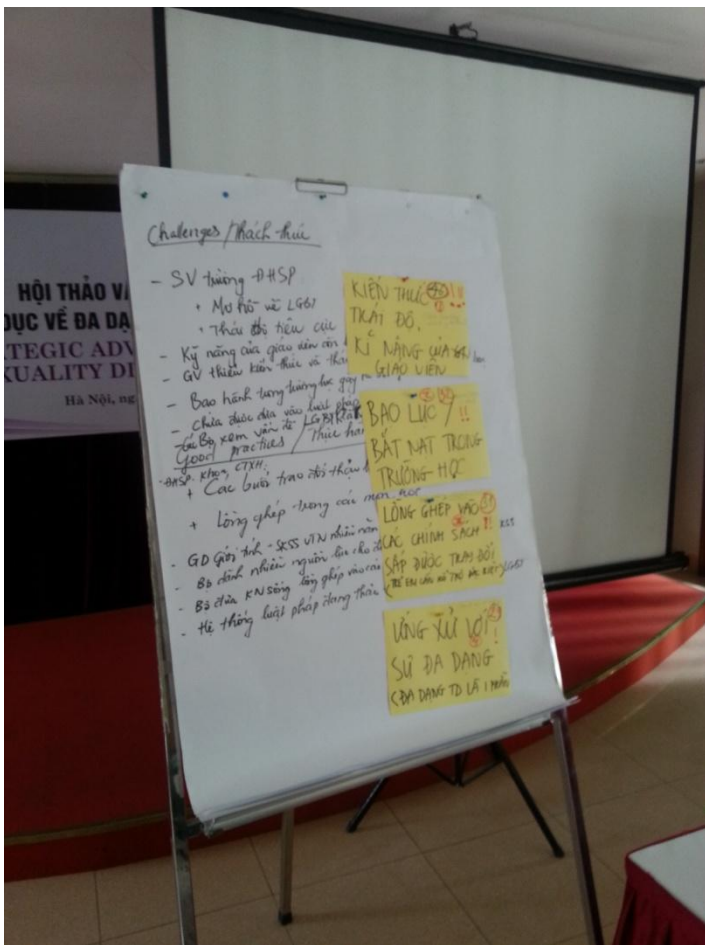


the main challenges in Vietnam is the quality of teachers: how can teachers be trained to make the shift from just transmitting facts to more interactive ways to involve students in learning and a focus on real life skills?

Photo: a subgroup works on a SWOT analysis

Peter Dankmeijer, who facilitated the workshop on behalf of GALE, pointed out that one of the central tasks of schools is to prepare students to be good citizens. A key competence to be a good citizen is to learn to know what you want, to be able to make this clear and to be flexible in dealing with new situations and unexpected events – which is dealing with

diversity. When students and teachers are only used to deal with nonconformity by using



violence (like corporal punishment and bullying), they role model the exact opposite of such skills. This link between diversity education and key ‘transversal’ competences, may be the best argument to engage in dialogue between mainstream and LGBT civil society, and the government.

Photo: summary of the SWOT analysis on the strategic workshop

Vietnamese young people trained to engage in education about LGBT issues

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On May 4, GALE trained 20 LGBT and straight young Vietnamese people to engage in informal education through storytelling. The youngsters were members of CCIHP (The Center for Creative initiatives in Health and Population), the Coalition for Sexual Health and iSEE (Institute for Studies of Society, Economy and Environment).

Although Vietnam as a State could be labeled a rather progressive country in the Asian context, young people are socially excluded, intimidated and bullied like in most other countries. The close ties with the family and the required respect for parents and authorities make it difficult to come out. This group of young people was convinced something needs to be done and that they wanted to act up themselves. Informal education by telling and sharing stories is one way to do this.

The group had a lot of questions which mainly focused on how to technically tell a story in



such a ways that is most effective in changing the minds of other young people. Also there was great interest in what information should be given to make prejudiced youngsters change their mind of about LGBT people.

Photo: two participants do an exercise in asking each

other prejudiced questions and trying to answer them in a sensitive way

For some, it was a bit frustrating, but also enlightening to learn that there is not ONE technique to tell an effective story, and that information does not make people change their minds. Peter Dankmeijer, training on behalf of GALE, discussed the spiral process of discrimination and social exclusion and the reasons behind this downward spiral. This analysis made clear that people only change their mind when they first ‘unfreeze’ their solidified negative emotions about sexual diversity. Through a range of exercises and discussions, the participants discovered what lies behind the prejudiced questions and comments of young people, and how stories, open questions and an open dialogue can be used to ‘unfreeze’ the students. Once a stage of safety, openness and curiosity is reached, only then offering true knowledge is useful in education sessions. But by then, the most



important goals of the session have already been accomplished.

The training ended with a role play in which Dankmeijer ‘played’ an educator and was confronted with a firing squad of the most difficult and

confrontational questions the participants could think of. Through this ‘role modeling’ and also by getting some side comments on which ‘techniques’ Dankmeijer used and why, it became more clear how the theory could be translated into practice.