

Case study (Education):

Education of children from Vietnamese families by Czech nannies

Often, children from migrant families encounter difficulties in the school system. Insufficient performance at school leads to the deepening of segregation. The presented practice, the day-care of Vietnamese children by Czech host families, is an example for a surprisingly informal and successful grass-root-strategy, which developed apparently spontaneously in the Czech city of Cheb. It is one of the factors that paved the way for the renowned educational success of the city's large Vietnamese minority's second generation.

Area: Education

Kind-category of project: Informal Practice

Kind-category of actor: Czech and Vietnamese families

Country: Czech Republic

Year: Since the 1990s

5 key-words: education, private initiative, Vietnamese minority, Czech Republic,

THE PROJECT

Objectives, activities and results

Unlike most other practices presented on the Interculture -Map portal, the very common usage of Czech nannies to educate children from Vietnamese families is in no way linked to a formal organisation, company or government institution. This interesting example of a highly successful intercultural practice is instead the result of informal agreements between Vietnamese families and Czech women, who are either in senior citizens or unemployed. Alone in the city of Cheb, where an estimated fifth of the city's 35,000 inhabitants are migrants from Vietnam, it can be estimated that these informal (and, from the point of view of financial authorities, illegal) arrangements create employment for several hundred Czech women.

This description is mainly based on interviews with Czech women working as nannies in the city of Cheb. The Czech Republic's current tax system provides strong incentives to perform this work in an informal way. To protect our interview partners, we will not provide names or contact information of the persons interviewed.

Structure and Steps

Due to the lack of an external sponsor or initiator, it is in the case of this practice impossible to speak of "project objectives". Instead, we summarized in the table below what motivated the participating partners (Vietnamese families, Czech mothers) to seek or accept taking part in these informal arrangements.

	Vietnamese families	Czech women
Economic Incentives	- The business requires that the biological mother must work; she cannot afford to stay at	- The primary motivation is financial. To take care of Vietnamese children helps to

	home with the child.	sustain financially independence and / or leads to a higher living standard.
Social incentives	- The parents' Czech language skills are in many cases very limited. Making use of the services of a nanny prepares the child perfectly for their education in Czech schools.	- For some of the women, the job as nanny is also a substitute for own children who have grown up.

Since the practice helped to prevent the emergence of many typical problems, which trouble many other immigrant communities in Europe, it would now be appropriate to describe the practice in regard to its impact on the wider community:

- The pre-school education of Vietnamese children by Czech nannies reduces integration difficulties at school.
- The practice leads to increased social interactions between Vietnamese and Czech families.
- The second generation has very strong personal ties within the Czech community in the city.

Place and Social Context

The first group of Vietnamese came to Czechoslovakia as “contract workers” to “labour off” their country’s debt in the late 1970’s. Living highly segregated from the domestic population, the Vietnamese were not allowed to have children. After the end of the socialist regime, many Vietnamese began to make their living in trade, especially in the border regions with Germany and Austria. One of the places they settled was the city of Cheb, which despite its relatively small size of 35,000 and a rather remote geographical location, is today one of the Czech Republic’s most multicultural cities. For additional information about the life of the Vietnamese minority in the city, we recommend the [Interculture Map background report](#).

Target

The practice delivers benefits to: Vietnamese families, Czech women, and children from Vietnamese families

Methodology

Being no longer restricted in founding families after 1990, the Vietnamese community soon experienced the birth of their first children. In their home country, it was usually the task of the grandparents to take care of the children. In the foreign environment, the Vietnamese

families were confronted with the need to find a different arrangement. As described in greater detail in the above-mentioned report, the Vietnamese community in Cheb is dominated by hierarchic clan structures. The ordinary Vietnamese need to deliver parts of their income to the “bosses” of the community. In addition to this many of the Vietnamese pay money to their families back home, which is often “invested” collectively to arrange the emigration papers for one family member. These and other financial constraints preclude the option, that one of the parents would take care of the children. Due to this situation, the Vietnamese began to look for Czech women who would be willing to take care of their children. In the beginning, they found interested women through newspaper advertisements. Later, the arrangements were mostly made on the basis of informal recommendations.

Many Vietnamese families work seven days a week from the morning to the evening. To be a nanny is hence a very demanding and highly responsible profession. Our interviewees stated that they would try to cope with this by cooperating with other nannies, even though the Vietnamese parents would often not like the idea that the care for the child is transferred to another person. Most parents would also prefer if their child is the only child that is taken care of. Despite of this, the nannies interviewed for this study managed to convince the parents that the child would not suffer if they take care of more than one child at once. From the perspectives of the nannies, this obviously increases the otherwise rather problematic relationship between work input and reimbursement (which is usually not higher than € 200,00 per child). This salary includes spending for feeding and bathing the child

In many cases, the responsibility for the children is transferred already at the early age of six weeks. The work continues at least until the child reaches school age. If the Vietnamese parents can afford to continue paying for childcare, the nannies continue to supervise the child until it is 10 or 12. Due to the usually very close contact between child and foster mother, the social contact prevails often much longer than this period.

Experiences

Strengths

Living mostly in the fairly closed world of their ethnic community, most Vietnamese have difficulties communicating in Czech. Considering this fact and the typical problems of other immigrant communities in European societies, it is surprising that the Czech-born children from Vietnamese families are highly successful in school (see background report). One factor that contributes strongly to this is the familiarity with the Czech language and culture gained through the education by Czech nannies.

The Vietnamese children do not only have no particular difficulties at school, they perform on average better than Czech children. Teachers at the school explained this with the very high appreciation of education in the Asian cultures. It seems that the Vietnamese parents were hence able to pass this cultural heritage to their children, even though they spend very limited time with them.

What is possibly most interesting and convincing about this practice is the lack of any intervention by the state bureaucracy. Even though there is very limited contact between biological parents and their children, and the daily interchange between Czech and

Vietnamese culture seems to be accompanied by some psychological distress, the highly individual solution practiced in Cheb might be better able to handle this than collective solutions, such as day nurseries or boarding schools.

The education of Vietnamese children through Czech mothers has to be seen as a highly interesting social experiment, which occurred in reaction to a specific social situation. A child born in the early 1990s is today (2006) 15 or 16 years. The success of these children became known in the entire Czech Republic, when a very large percentage of successful applicants to the city *gymnasium* (elite high school) were from the ranks of the Vietnamese minority. Despite of this successes, it is too early to really assess how the “nanny”-practice will affect the long-term development of the concerned children.

Critical points

As noted already, in many cases the Vietnamese parents spend a very limited time with their children. One resulting problem is the insufficient knowledge of the Vietnamese language among the second generation. This problem seems particularly urgent because of the uncertain future of the Vietnamese community in the Czech Republic. In many cases it is not clear whether the families will gain residence status or whether they will have to return to Vietnam at some point. Due to the very low Czech proficiency of many adult Vietnamese and the insufficient language skills of the younger Vietnamese a significant barrier has been created between first and the second generation. The Vietnamese community reacted to the problem with the installation of Vietnamese language classes, which take place in one of the city’s Vietnamese markets during the afternoons.

The language problem however, might be the most visible sign of deeper psychological problems, which might develop due to the cultural, linguistic, and occupational alienation between parents and children. The emergence of such potential problems might become visible only when the parent generation will be too old to continue its highly industrious way of life. It should be noted, however, that such potential psychological problems (which could be observed in the case of other “too fast” assimilating groups, such as the Jewish emigrants in the US or the Asian-American communities) would not be result of the “nanny practice” per se, but rather of the extreme workload of the Vietnamese migrants and the lack of the extensive family structures found in the home country.

Another critical remark concerns the legal framework in the Czech Republic, which makes it very unattractive to work legally as a nanny. In consequence, almost all women offer their work in an informal way. Everybody interviewed expressed great dissatisfaction with this situation. Considering the benefits to the entire community, the Czech Republic would be well advised to create a legal option to pursue this work without large financial losses.

Lessons Learnt

The education of Vietnamese children through Czech nannies seems to be a fairly unique response to a very specific situation. Obviously, it is not possible to simply transfer this inter-cultural practice into a different cultural and economic environment: It seems for example

doubtful, whether all minority groups are to the same extent capable of organising such a solution without external support. In more affluent countries, migrant groups would typically not have the resources to finance the extremely time-consuming work of a nanny.

Despite of these limitations, the practice is characterised by a number of interesting principles, which might be considered when searching for inter-cultural solutions in other social and cultural environments:

Educational failure of migrant youths is one of the most urgent problems that trouble many migrant communities. Usually, the discussion of potential solutions for this problem focuses on collective programmes, such as the creation of special school programmes, pre-school education, boarding schools, etc. One reason why such approaches are often not successful is the often-observed concentration of migrants in such facilities, which are often avoided by parents that belong to the majority population. The concentration of minority students complicates the majority language acquisition. The practice developed by the Cheb Vietnamese community completely circumvents this problem. This seems even more remarkable, when considering that the Vietnamese minority live relatively isolated from the rest of society.

Depending on the situation found in a concrete locality, it would be possible to use some elements in different ways. In a situation, where unemployment is high among the majority population, the care for children from minority families could be organised in the form of public works. One should, however, realise, that the motivation to temporarily transfer the responsibility for one's child will be much lower in the case of migrant families, where the mother stays anywhere at home (as it is very often the case in Turkish or Arab families living in Western European countries). In such a situation, the solution might not be to provide financial incentives to convince migrants to give their children away (and locals to take them), but to inspire projects that would bring women from both cultures together.

The day care by "partner families" might however be an option in cases, where the biological parents are believed to be not capable of taking fully care of the children. The "nanny practice" could be a convincing alternative to children's homes and similar institutions. Partner families living in spatial proximity to the parents might also be an alternative to the often-discussed idea of boarding schools in the case of informal Roma settlements in Eastern Europe. The example of Cheb, also shows that the practice could be a powerful source of income for economically weak members of the majority population.