



Educational Dialogues in Southeast Asian Children Literature: Reading the Vietnamese Novel *Ticket to Childhood* (Nguyễn Nhật Ánh, 2008) and the Indonesian Novel *The Rainbow Troops: A Novel* (Andrea Hirata, 2005) in Comparison

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[*Abstract*]

Education is widely considered an essential tool for national development, particularly in Southeast Asia, in which advancing education ideally means advancing social cohesion, and security, and economic growth. This paper juxtaposes *The Rainbow Troops: A Novel* (2005, hereafter *The Rainbow Troops*) by Indonesian writer Andrea Hirata and *Cho tôi xin một vé đi tuổi thơ* (*Ticket to Childhood*, 2008) by Vietnamese writer Nguyễn Nhật Ánh, understanding their potentially generated dialogue about idealized education. Reading character constructions and narrative flows against educational policies and realities of Vietnam and Indonesia in particular and Southeast Asia at large reveals criticism about the true goals of education programs pertaining to children. Specifically, they provoke in readers questions about the role of education as a tool for national development appropriate to each political and economic context and the respect for the psychological, intellectual, and physical development of children.

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I . Introduction

In terms of policy, countries in Southeast Asia in particular, and the world in general emphasize the importance of education for national development. Accordingly, education is considered an essential tool for designing citizens according to a model that is said to be oriented toward national development in each certain period. Specifically, education "is imperative for the future of ASEAN countries, "given that "education is an investment that advances social cohesion and security, and economic growth" (Wong 2020). In Indonesia, according to Law No.2 of 1989, the education system is aimed at attempting to "form genuine Pancasila citizens" who are subjected to providing "support for the development of Indonesian society, the nation and country." Likewise, the Indonesian education system is defined as "a conscious effort to prepare the Indonesian nation" to defend its cultural tradition. Politically, the national education system of Indonesia is seen as "a very important tool" in achieving "true independence" of the Indonesian nation (Embassy of the Republic of Indonesia). Similarly, Vietnamese policymakers have viewed education as central to nation-building. The first realization of this policy was with the establishment of a revolutionary Marxist-Leninist educational settlement. The second was in the late 1980s with the Reform Policy when education was subjected to the nation's global political, economic, and cultural integration (Albright 2022). Resolution of the 7th Congress (1993) identifies education as the top national policy, given that it "is a driving force and a basic condition to ensure the implementation of socio-economic goals, building and protecting the country" (Đỗ Mười 1993).

Nevertheless, literary works in the region provide a different perspective on educational policy, questioning the true purpose of educational development when making it associated with individual beings, particularly children and teachers who are the main subjects

of education. This question is especially haunting in children's literary works set in learning contexts with characters typical for an education system as parents, children, teachers, and education policymakers. *The Rainbow Troops: A Novel* (2005, hereafter *The Rainbow Troops*) by Indonesian writer Andrea Hirata and *Cho tôi xin một vé đi tuổi thơ* (*Ticket to Childhood*, 2008) by Vietnamese writer Nguyễn Nhật Ánh are the two most outstanding children's literature works of contemporary Indonesian and Vietnamese literature that offer criticism about the true goals of education programs pertaining children. Juxtaposing the portrayals of childhood in the two works reveals the tension between the role of education as a tool for national development appropriate to each political and economic context and the respect for the psychological, intellectual, and physical development of children.

The way of reading these two works, generally categorized as children's literature, as allegories of the educational policies and realities of the region originates from Kimberly Reynolds's idea on the relationship between children's literature and the educational system. According to Reynolds (2011), one quality that identifies children's literature is its "overt engagements with ideological positions and agendas ... of a given moment" (Reynolds 2011: 33). Thus, writing for children is potentially a source of historical information about everything from everyday life from mundane activities to topical debates; it can be "a particularly valuable source of historical information about everything" (Reynolds 2022: 4), either domestic and institutional, official and unofficial, high and mass. Specifically, children's literature includes perspectives "of relatively simple constructions and close connection to the education system" (Reynolds 2022: 4); even sometimes, as explored by Reynolds (2011), children's literature plays tools of debates about educational theories.

The two children's novels *The Rainbow Troops* and *Ticket to Childhood* open up ideas about the education policies of Indonesia and Vietnam respectively, demonstrating challenges in educational reforms in developing countries of the Southeast Asian region. The plots of both works revolve around events related to children going to school. *The Rainbow Troops* (2005) is the story of ten poor students

and teachers of a small and poor Islamic school Muhammadiyah, on Belitung Island, a little island in the Indonesian archipelago southeast of Sumatra famous for its tin mines. Teachers and students who fight against the fierce challenges of the world to gain and protect the right to study enshrined in the Indonesian constitution. As narrated, the local education authority warned the principal of this struggling elementary school to close down it if there were not enough students recruited, at least ten new students. Their teacher, the caring Miss Muslimah, denies the well-paid job at a more prestigious school to continue teaching at this miserable school because her "students, the "rainbow troops," born to miners and fishermen, do not exert effort to go to a better school. The young Malay Ikal and his friends on the small island of Belitung off Sumatra attend a school run by the Islamic Muhammadiyah organization and are constantly threatened with closure. Two of the main characters are the veteran Pak Harfan and the Ibu Muslimah; both of them are dedicated teachers, who strive to keep the school open in facing multiple challenges including school superintendents, the tin mining company, and poverty. They threaten the children to quit school.

Circulated anecdotes about the formation and publication of *The Rainbow Troop* also indicate its explicit engagement with educational issues in Indonesia. As narrated by Pallavi Aiyar (2013), by 2005, Hirata worked at a telecommunications company in the west Javanese city of Bandung. One day his former classmate informed him that their former teacher, the inspirational Ibu Muslimah, was sick. This triggered his childhood memories, urging him to compose *The Rainbow Troop* as a way to show his gratitude to the teacher. Hirata began writing that very night and before he knew it, he says, he had 600 pages worth of memories down on paper. His teacher, Ibu Muslimah, has been awarded one of the Indonesian state's highest honors for her services to education (Aiyar 2013).

Similarly, the formation and the publication of Nguyễn Nhật Ánh's *Ticket to Childhood* (2008),¹ appears to be derived from an

¹ It was voted the best work of 2009 in Vietnam. Also in 2009, the work received

idealized return to childhood. based on the memories of its author but manifested by an eight-year-old character named Mũi and his close friends Hải Cò, Tí, and Tùn. The four children study together, play together, and manage to find happiness in their boring lives and the "injustices" that those parents and teachers imposed on them. The "naughty" games become beautiful memories when they are viewed from the perspective of an adult. As narrated by the author himself, he wrote *Ticket to Childhood* "not for children" but "for those who used to be children." Each story is meant to provoke readers who used to be children remember to their childhood time. Those who read the book step into a memory train that brings them back to their childhood (Hoang Xuan Vin and Hoang Huu Phuoc 2017: 408). The work is also widely recognized in Vietnam as a message about the problems of children's education. Accordingly, the book is seen not only as "a trustworthy and understanding spiritual companion for children" but also "helps adults have a sympathetic and open way of feeling and looking at children, thereby reflecting on themselves in educating their children and students with positive, progressive, and healthy thinking." The book encourages adults to relive childhood again as a way to educate their children because reliving childhood brings respect for our students and our children in the present. This work suggests that adults should "know how to live with children in a close and tolerant way" because education is based on "deep love and empathy" (Hà 2019). Both *Ticket to Childhood* and *The Rainbow Troops* revolve around childhood memories. Their narrators play the role of adults who return to their childhood to write about their primary school days, provoking audiences without thinking about education and childhood, particularly about children's rights and the meaning of childhood on the journey of each person becoming adulthood. All of this challenges educational programs and policies of Vietnam and Indonesia that tend to be subjected to national politics, not counting children's intelligence and physicality: what makes children happy and what are the criteria for evaluating the

many awards like the Good Book Award from the Vietnam Publishing Association, the Vietnam Writers Association Award, and the ASEAN Literature Award. This work has been translated into English, Korean, Thai, and Japanese, entering the list of 105 most-read books in the world

success of an education? Is it children's happiness or the development and prosperity of a nation?

II . Going to School: A Right or Obligation?

The right to education is recognized in children's laws in most countries around the world. Article 16 of the Vietnamese Law of Children maintains that children have "the right to education and learning for all-sided development and promotion of his/her potential to the utmost (National Assembly). In Indonesia, the government has been making efforts to realize child rights to education by encouraging universal secondary education known as the twelve-year compulsory education. Law Number 20/2003 on the National Education, Article 11, also ensures the accessibility of education for all citizens without any racial, ethnic, social, religious, cultural, or physical discrimination (Thoyibi 2016) In general, the right to education is one of the legal rights of children. Every child has the right to go to school and the right to receive educational opportunities to develop comprehensively and promote their potential.

However, the novels *The Rainbow Troops* and *Ticket to Childhood* in their literary ways provoke more diverse and dynamic realities than laws and policies. The novel *The Rainbow Troops* is set amidst a backdrop of rapaciousness, economic inequality, and religious syncretism. In that setting, children and parents struggle for survival, thus going to school is something that is beyond their effort and attention. The right to study becomes a luxury for poor children whose parents work as fishermen, miners, or coolies for tin mining enterprises. Parents expect their children to work to earn money and help their families. Ensuring enough food to feed the whole family becomes a prerequisite, vital, and more important than sending children to school to receive results that they cannot imagine. Most parents do not think that if their children are educated, the future of their family will be brighter, even if they have a choice, they think that it is better if they let their children work and earn money. Thus, children are largely "forced to be at this school," "either to avoid

reproach from government officials for not sending their children to school or to submit to modern demands to free their children from illiteracy" (Hirata 2013: 5).

The construction of child characters in *The Rainbow Troops* appears to highlight that the right to education does not mean much for miserable families on Belitung Island in Indonesia. The book's most compelling character is the talented Lintang, a math genius, He is the son of an illiterate fisherman "whose passion for school sees him cycling an 80-kilometer round trip journey every day, past crocodile-infested swamps" (Aiyar 2013). After his father dies in an accident, Lintang is forced to stop going to school; he has to become the breadwinner of this family. The character Mahar, another student, since the second grade, has to work after school as a coolie, "grating coconuts at a Chinese produce stall" for hours all day long. This causes "his hands to develop an oily appearance that never went away" (Hirata 2013: 69) His life was surrounded by "a sound of deprivation, hard work and a poor life without a choice" (Hirata 2013: 69). Thus amid numbing poverty, children are prevented from accessing education, creating the pervading tragedy of wasted talent.

Most characters of the story are set in the dying moments of school and schooling. An educational inspector is waiting for the moment when Muhammadiyah Primary School does not have ten students to publish the decree of closing the school. Contrasting with the image of the inspector and the parents is the desire to go to the school of nine children and the teaching desire of Rector Halfar and teacher Mus. All these contrasts in emotions and thoughts are encapsulated and expressed sharply in the opening ceremony of Muhammadiyah Primary School on Belitung Island. All morning, the Rector, teacher, and nine students are nervous, because without the tenth student, the school would immediately be closed. Instead of the opening speech, there will be a closing speech. Instead of going to school, the children will return, failing to learn on the first day of school. Therefore, the tense atmosphere with pent-up conflicts that open the work puts children's right to go to school in an impossible situation. Thus, although the Indonesian constitution and law recognize children's right to go to school,

reality with economic constraints, as portrayed in the novel *The Rainbow Troops*, does not allow that right to be exercised. For poor children,

The novel indicates that education is still a luxury. It can only be taken into account when material life is ensured to a certain extent. The novel appears to reflect the very situation of economic constraints that have delayed educational reforms that ensure the goal of attaining nine years of compulsory education in Indonesia. As recorded, Indonesia spent less than two percent of GNP on education during the period 1986-1996. Declining household incomes make families difficulties in meeting school- and exam fees, and costs for books and school uniforms (Sjöholm 2002). The situation of Indonesia as such is consonate with other developing Southeast Asian countries at the end of the twentieth century. As recorded, developing countries, including Southeast Asian countries, face an enormous challenge in ensuring equitable access to quality education in the context of deepening globalization and increasing international competition. They must simultaneously meet the goals of Education for All (EFA) at the basic education level and of developing a more sophisticated workforce required by the knowledge-based economy at the post-basic, especially tertiary, education level. To meet this challenge, developing countries need to reform their education systems and service deliveries as an integral part of national development. However, most of them have not yet fully developed individual, institutional, and system capacities in undertaking necessary education reforms, especially under decentralization and privatization requiring new roles at various (central and local, or public and private) levels of administration and stakeholders.

In contrast to the students of Muhammadiyah Primary School on Belitung Island, who have to fight like warriors to be able to go to school, the story of the little boy Mũi and his friends in *Ticket to Childhood* shows that going to study is mandatory torture for eight-year-old children. Their hyperactive nature make Mũi and his close friends see school as a prison. Going to school is like "leaving one prison to go to another" (Nguyễn Nhật Ánh 2009: 19). The boy sees that studying is not a legal right, does not bring happiness, but

“imprisons” the happiness of himself and his friends.). Mùì, Hài Cò, Tí Sún, and Tùn all do not like going to school and want to “protest” against their right to go to school, be educated, and have their parents and teachers care, urge, and supervise them. For these characters, going to school makes them completely lose their freedom. It can be seen in the harsh contrast between the characters of *Ticket to Childhood* and those of *The Rainbow Troops* when the nine children in the latter constantly “felt heartbroken ” (Hirata 2013: 6), considering school closure due to an insufficient number of students. It is obvious for the characters, particularly those who are at the elementary school level in Nguyễn Nhật Anh's novel, going to school is just a forced obligation. That raises the question of what is the meaning of making education a right for children and if the institutionalized function of education as an instrument for the country's development comes to life.

Obviously, *The Rainbow Troops* and *Ticket to Childhood* raise questions about the application of the right to go to school for children of primary school age in reality. Idealistically, going to school is a legitimate right of children; ensuring children's right to go to school is the responsibility of the government, schools, families, and the entire society. It is the two novels that portray the active participation of teachers and families at different levels in children's learning. However, *The Rainbow Troops* shows that economics is the main factor making children hard to go to school. For children living in uneducated and miserable families in Indonesia, learning is sometimes just a dream. Because it is a dream and something out of reach, the children's characters have to try their best to gain and maintain it. Meanwhile, as portrayed in *Ticket to Childhood*, girls, and boys in a Vietnamese school see that going to school is a must, something that adults impose, causing a loss of their childhood happiness.

The difference in statuses and attitudes towards education opened in the two novels suggests the need for a psychological approach to understanding children's happiness and demands. Is it true that seven or eight-year-old children do not like to learn? Thérèse Gouin-Décarie, known as a Canadian developmental psychologist and educator, specializing in intellectual and emotional

development in children believes that this seven or eight-year-old age is a "phase of expansion: children seem to go beyond the family environment and find it difficult to comply with a somewhat strict discipline" (Gouin-Décarie 2018: 176).² She also quoted Gesell's observation: The mind of an eight-year-old child is always busy occupying new areas" (Gouin-Décarie 2018: 176). Physical and intellectual growth at the age of eight makes children love to move and explore, rather than sit still in class or adhere to strict discipline. This physiological characteristic is portrayed in the children's characters who love to play and do not like to be in the school framework is widely recognized work in the history of children's literature such Astrid Lindgren's *Pippy Longstocking* (Sweden), René Goscinny's *Kid Nicolas* (France), Tetsuko Kuroyanagi's *Totto-chan the Little Girl by the Window* (Japan), Kao Son's *Muddy Nursery Rhyme* (*Khúc đồng dao lấm láp*, Vietnam), and Nguyễn Ngọc Thuần's *A Dream* (*Một thiên năm mộng*, Vietnam). This age-based emotional and intellectual characteristic can be found in many passages describing the natural landscapes of Belitong in the childhood eye that is projected by the adult Ika's memory of "the sweet composition of the landscape: the mountain, the valley, the river, and the sea" where children could "loosen your shirt and breath in the fresh southern winds carrying the aroma of androecium patel from the heart flowers, (Hirata 2013: 149). Thus, the two novels suggest that going to school is not an ideal place for children to expand their own world and to feel the world around them, thus it is not a matter of children whether education is a right or a mandatory obligation.

In Vietnam, education is considered instrumental for national development. However, the attitude towards going to school in Nguyễn Nhật Ánh's novel reveals a different view on children's right to education. If the boys and girls in *The Rainbow Troops* aspire to go to school and try their best to ensure that they can go to school, a different voice resounds in *Ticket to Childhood*: studying is miserable, losing freedom and without anything interesting. On the

² Quotes from Thérèse Gouin-Décarie's work are translated from the Vietnamese version of her work *Thế giới bí mật của trẻ em* [The Secret World of Children], published in 2018 by Hồng Đức Publishing House

one hand, going to school is a paradise of knowledge, giving wings to dreams; on the other hand, it is a place where free souls and feet are confined. On the one hand, parents and teachers have to work until they are exhausted to expect their children to be able to go to school; on the other hand, parents have to push, remind, and closely follow to go to school on time and do homework. This dimension opens up the interesting meaning of education with children, raising the question: How to make learning a real gift for the future owners of the world? After kindergarten, usually at the age of six, children will officially go to primary school. This is a turning point in their lives when they say goodbye to the river of childhood to officially enter a new journey: learning to become an accomplished person in the future. This key point is compared to “a person who wades across a river, has just left the bank here (childhood), crossing the water to the other side (age of understanding, age of peace, rest and recuperate before reaching puberty)”(Gouin-Décarie 2018: 159). Therefore, it is very important to include in education policies age-based physiological points in which children at the ages of seven and eight are prepared in the way that they are not shocked and depressed going to school while being awakened by the seeds of good intellect and emotion in sensing and feeling the world around them.

III. Which Educational Model is the Best?

Recognizing the role of education in national prosperity and ensuring the rights of education for children, most Southeast Asian countries pursue compulsory education policies for children at various levels, for example: "6 years in Indonesia; 9 years in Thailand and Cambodia, 10 years in Singapore, Malaysia, and the Philippines" (Phạm Việt Vương 2023). This allows the expansion of educational forms, from public to private to mobilize as many resources as possible for educational activities. The Vietnamese National Congress 7 of Vietnam identifies that “investment in education must be considered one of the main directions of development investment, creating conditions for education to go ahead and effectively serve socio-economic development.” (Đỗ Mười

1993). The Congress also encourages the entire society “to do education, encouraging people from all walks of life to contribute to building a national education system under the management of the State” (Đỗ Mười 1993). Likewise, the Indonesian government identifies the need for educational socialization facing financial insufficiencies in implementing compulsory education (Hendajany 2016: 66-89).

The Rainbow Troops and *Ticket to Childhood* also open up controversial perspectives about the contrasts between these forms of education. In *Ticket to Childhood*, readers may notice a rather homogeneous picture of education, where children enjoy an equal and unified education. Meanwhile, *The Rainbow Troops* depicts the sharp division and opposition between different forms of education. So what is the model of education that children need the most, and which model is the most meaningful for their development? As described in *The Rainbow Troops*, on Belitung Island, there are three types of schools: public schools (slightly mentioned in the Good Student contest), private ones for children of wealthy families (namely PN), and a religious one for poor children (represented by the Muslim Muhammadiyah Primary School). In private schools, on the first day of school, each student can sew three uniforms at the same time, while Muhammadiyah students wear bottomless "grubby clothes" all year, and walk to school without wearing shoes (Hirata 2013 2005: 54). If private school students are always clean and fragrant, going to school on blue buses, their uniforms are also blue, just like the angels in the picture under Ikal's admiring gaze, Muhammadiyah's students are inspected by superintendent Mister Samadikun, who look at them as looking at: the mouse-deer hunters, not students" (Hirata 2013 2005: 54). look at their school "no different than a livestock pen" (Hirata 2013 2005: 54). The material condition of the school is below the pathetic level, which is understandable because this is the poorest school, for the poorest students on Belitung Island. None of the fifth-grade students know what crayons, compasses, and calculators are. The sharp contrast between the two schools is in teaching and learning conditions, which are mainly caused by different financial investments. While private school has expensive tuition fees, only for the children of

employees of the tin mining company with very high income, luxurious and rich lives, Muhammadiyah is a free school and its teachers make their living by side jobs after class time. Private school, as described in the novel, dampened the people's enthusiasm for school. That discrimination made native Belitung inhabitants believe that only children of PN staff could be successful in school and get the chance to go on to university. PN is described as "a center of excellence," "a place of the best"; where "hundreds of qualified students competed at the highest standard." Facilities of this private school are complete: Each classroom is decorated with many paintings, worksheets, periodic tables of the chemical elements, world maps, pictures of the President and Vice President, national symbols, and even skeletons, spheres, and symbols of the solar system (Hirata 2013: 23). Its Rector is highly educated, the school has many teachers, and each subject is handled by a teacher. Students are equipped with diverse and sufficient physical conditions to serve the most effective lesson.

The difference between the PN school and the public Muslim elementary school is compared by the narrator "the difference between land and sky" (Hirata 2013: 23). The Muhammadiyah school, as described, is so shabby that a "trong wind that shakes the students' souls with fear of their school collapse" (Hirata 2013: 15) "A roof with a leak so large that students see planes flying in the sky and have to hold the umbrella while studying on rainy days, a cement floor continuously decomposing into sand" (Hirata 2013: 15). The ending images of the school signify the school's condition sinking and fading away, about to disappear; "the bell had vanished"; "the school name board had fallen down and lay pitifully sprawled down out on the ground(Hirata 2013: 216). What they have in school are lots of holes on the roof and crumbling cement on the classroom floor. The school is falling apart. The school has no toilets, no electricity, all-natural light, and no uniforms.

The Rainbow Troop's narrator draws a sharp contrast between the gray patches of Muhammadiyah and the bright, heavenly colors of the private school to see the profound divergence in the educational picture on Belitung Island. The narrative overtly differentiating the public school from the private school reveals the

sharp distinction between rich and poor in Indonesian society, which then also affects each child's intelligence, emotions as well as study performance. As described, students of PN school "were awfully intelligent and had won at the national level" (Hirata 2013: 65). Meanwhile, students of the public school, as in the words of the class president, "these coolie children cannot be kept under control!" They are seen to act wildly: "Borek acts like a mental hospital patient. Sahara and A Kiong fight nonstop ... Harun does nothing but sleep. And Ikal ... was sent by Satan!" (Hirata 2013: 36). The gap between the rich and the poor creates a heterogeneous education picture on Belitung Island. It is easy to see that it is the social and economic differentiation that causes inequality in children's development opportunities and a discriminatory view of public school children.

Meanwhile, in *Ticket to Childhood*, the first person narrator shows different things taking place simultaneously. In this novel, Mũi and his friends enjoy a single educational model, which is a public, general, universal education for all children. Mũi and his classmates share the same school, classes, teachers, principal, and rhythm that he finds strongly boring and monotonous: Going to school in the morning, studying in the afternoon, studying at night until tired, and walking to bed; the next morning, he will go to school again, fidget during class, just waiting for playtime like the most meaningful thing in the world. That rhythm made the boy one day suddenly realize "life is so boring and boring" (Nguyễn Nhật Ánh 2009: 10). Boredom permeates every moment, especially in studying. Although only going to class in the morning, the afternoon, and evening, Mũi has to spend time studying what his son calls "chanting," which is "the more you chant, the more you forget but still chant." "When the rice is cooked, I lazily eat rice while waiting to continue studying" (Nguyễn Nhật Ánh 2009: 24). Trying to studying over and over and still forgetting his lessons, his "body is mercilessly knocked down by sleep" (Nguyễn Nhật Ánh 2009: 26). Teachers teach in class, and at home, students have the task of memorizing. But the boring knowledge does not stimulate discovery and dialogue like this, causing Mũi to learn from one ear to the other, and no matter how hard he tries, he will immediately

forget it.

Although *Ticket to Childhood* does not refer to the material problems of the educational environment, it shows the reader the current reality of Vietnamese education: dogmatic education, imparting knowledge without skills, and not paying attention to the comprehensive development of children. It is widely believed among experts in education in Vietnam that its education system is characterized by being dogmatic and features by crammed knowledge, heavy on examination. That education fails to promote the dynamics, and creativity of the learners. Vietnamese education system typically “heavily bases itself scores as the decisive criteria to judges the study ability of a student. Meanwhile, “learning program is too heavy” for children to have enough time for leisure and creativity (Truong Thị Bách Hạnh 2028). This type of education is presented in the image of Mùi. As narrated, little Mùi realizes that it is not difficult to become an excellent student. As long as he concentrates and memorizes all the knowledge in class fluently, he can make his parents happy and tearful, his friends and teachers are amazed as if Mùi has eight ears and at least two noses. Chapter 7 in this novel focuses on "How long am I good?" After collecting the highest marks with ease, the boy gets bored. "I am tired of studying well. I'm tired of memorizing. If every day I memorized the eloquent lesson, my life would fall into a new monotony, just like the days when I actively collected scores 4 and 5" (Nguyễn Nhật Ánh 2009: 128). Right from the age of eight, with the keen observation of a child, Mùi understands that learning without challenges will not bring excitement and nurture lasting motivation. Challenges cannot be created by memorizing knowledge or repeating the teacher's words. For Mùi, studying to get the highest mark or scores 4 or 5 makes no difference. The heavy dogmatic, theoretical lessons at school had almost no impact on the intellect and emotions, causing changes in the boy. There are also no new stimuli to challenge and unleash the potential in the boy and his friends. Being a good student quickly bores him when it does not bring about any change.

Similarly, in the novel *The Rainbow Troops*, images of children are highlighted with their imagination and their sensitive feelings toward the natural world. The state of exploring the world of

children, who are at the age that is defined as the age for elementary school, can also be found in *The Rainbow Troop*. As narrated, while completing an assignment for a camping program, Mahar, a member of the rainbow troop, is fascinated by what he asserts he sees in person: a flock of mysterious birds the people of Belitong call *painting pulau birds*" (literally meaning *island crossing birds*). It is that birth, whether exists in Mahar's imagination or in reality, that drives him to draw a painting for this assignment. Similarly, the mind of the narrator, who is also a member of the troop, is captured by the rich fauna and natural world of Belitong Island, regardless of class obligations or adults' strictness: "We ignored the threats of rattan whippings from our parents; they were nothing compared to the allure of the rain" (Hirata 2013: 139). As narrated, children greet the first rain which is thought to be the blessing from the sky. They are more excited listening to heavy rain, roaring thunder, stirring winds, and flashing lightning.

Ticket to Childhood is also very overt in criticizing the pressures, not only economic but also cultural and social pressures that all educational subjects (teachers, students, parents) have to endure when trying to follow the policy of compulsory school attendance or universal access to school. On the first day of school at Muhammadiyah, Ikal, and his friends understand and feel guilty about the situation at his school. After more than a hundred years, the school's glass cabinet is now empty because there are no resounding achievements to display; the school does not have a proud former student and of course, we haven't achieved any commendable achievements yet. If educational results are measured by specific criteria such as school achievements and successful students, it is clear that Muhammadiyah is an ineffective way of education, given after more than a hundred years of not achieving any specific achievements to prove their worth in the community. With the school slanting down day by day as if it were about to collapse, the poor teachers and the children are always in the fragile situation of being kicked out of school. On the opposite, the private school is a testament to the success of education. The school's students continuously won trophies in most of the excellent student competitions, in the carnival, the school trains excellent students

and successful citizens for society.

However, a question must be raised what the best form of education for children is, and the true value of education in the specific achievement of the students? The character Mùì in the novel *Ticket to Childhood* is "opposed" to academic achievement, suggesting that academic achievement is not associated with intellectual and mental development. Flor, who used to be a student at the private school in the novel *The Rainbow Troops*, insisted on dropping out and going to Muhammadiyah Primary School. All the most luxurious arrangements at school for Flor, like piano lessons, only made her yawn. Flor chooses to give up the best educational conditions to be in the same class as the poorest children of the lowest class on Belitung Island. This poor school has great appeal to it. She quickly blends in and becomes a very active member of The Rainbow Troops. Both *Ticket to Childhood* and *The Rainbow Troop* suggest an educational point that there is no single measure or standard to evaluate the achievements of an education. Scores and scholarly achievements only partly reflect educational effectiveness. It needs to count other factors related to the students themselves such as whether students are happy, whether they develop physically and mentally steadily day by day, and whether they know how to aim for good values as a destination.

The two novels demonstrate that educational effectiveness does not depend entirely on the form of education or financial and material investments, but on close interaction and connection between teachers and students so that the goal of education does not stop at scores or specific achievements. Any form of education will be meaningful if it focuses on investing in children, helping them develop, and giving them wings to fly independently and confidently into the future.

IV. Which Educational Method is the Best?

Ticket to Childhood and *The Rainbow Troops* bring about dialogues about educational methods for elementary students. These works refer to different teaching methods in two Southeast Asian

developing countries in the 1970s and 1980s. The stories of Vietnamese and Indonesian pupils help readers look back and know more about how children in developing countries had learned before schools were directly influenced by the internet and globalization.

Nguyễn Nhật Ánh's *Ticket to Childhood* demonstrates that imparting knowledge, respecting discipline, and promoting memorization have dominated the Vietnamese educational method. In this novel, the characters of parents and teachers try to create and maintain a stable rhythm so that children can focus maximally on learning. Children are responsible for following the schedule that their parents and teachers have established: going to school in the morning, reviewing lessons in the afternoon and evening until "memorizing all the next day's lessons" (Nguyễn Nhật Ánh 2009: 24), if not, they are not allowed to go to sleep. To ensure that children do not deviate from that schedule, teachers and parents must monitor, check, and remind regularly. Therefore, the child, who is the beneficiary of family and school supervision and education, loses his proactive position and freedom in thinking and solving problems. The boy Mũi in Nguyễn Nhật Ánh's work calls his daily study "chanting," meaning studying through memorization, remembers, and repeats the exact content of the lesson in class like a monk chants his sutras every day. This humorous comparison is a common way of talking about Vietnamese students' learning. In addition to the word "chanting," there are also some idioms like "learning like a hoe in the summer" (học như cuốc kêu mùa hè), "repeating like a parrot" (học vẹt), and "learning by rote" (học chay), which all describe students focusing on memorizing and repeating the lectures of their teachers in class. However, this teaching method makes words "like mortal enemies" (Nguyễn Nhật Ánh 2009: 24), too hard to remember, and students forget soon. Learning becomes a monotonous and heavy burden, causing the child to end the day with "wobbly, half-awake steps" (Nguyễn Nhật Ánh 2009: 26) to his bed. This schedule will be recurring the next day, making the protagonist feel bored because he always knows what will happen tomorrow.

The root cause of this educational method can be explained by

Nguyễn Quốc Vương's comments when he searched for Vietnamese educational philosophy: "Vietnamese people are heavily influenced by Confucianism, the imposition of values or ideas of the superior to the inferior is considered natural" (Nguyễn Quốc Vương 2019: 171). In Vietnam, teachers are always appreciated, respected, and considered to have a decisive influence on the success or failure of students. "Respecting teachers and morality" (tôn sư trọng đạo) has long become a beautiful cultural tradition of Vietnamese people (see more Cao 2022). There are many Vietnamese folk songs and proverbs that emphasize and promote the role of the teacher, such as "If you want to overcome a river, build a bridge/ If you want your child better, respect his teacher" (Muốn sang thì bắc cầu kiều/ Muốn con hay chữ thì yêu lấy thầy); "No teacher, no realization" (Không thầy đố mày làm nên) etc. On the one hand, the tradition of "respecting teachers and respecting morality" has a positive meaning in maintaining social order and school discipline. On the other hand, it directly affects the teaching process in which children/students are the beneficiaries. Little Mui and his friends saw school as a "prison" where he "does not like any subject from mathematics, writing to reading and spelling" (Nguyễn Nhật Ánh 2009: 18). Sometimes, this educational method is accompanied by punishment from parents and teachers, like what happened to the boy Cao in Kao Sơn's *The Muddy Rhyme* (*Khúc đồng dao lấm láp*): "My father smeared my butt. Teacher Hoi tapped the ruler on my fingers" (Kao Sơn 2001: 58). This educational method requires close coordination between parents and teachers so that children can remember the lessons, otherwise they are punished in many different forms. Although punishment by whipping is not officially encouraged in Vietnamese education, it is also considered ordinary in a society that still has the concept of "if you love someone, give that person a spanking" (Yêu cho roi cho vọt). In general, unilateral education, promoting the role of knowledge and that of the teacher, and disregarding or not paying attention to the role of children/pupils were popular methods in Vietnamese education in the 20th century. It can easily lead to prolonged boredom, reducing children's inherent ability to think, explore, and discover. The oppressive, unilateral teaching method reflected in Nguyễn Nhật Ánh's work helps readers partly realize the lack of democracy and

inequality in Vietnamese education in the 20th century.

Meanwhile, *The Rainbow Troops* makes a "dialogue" about teaching methods with *Ticket to Childhood*. Hirata's work raises the question: if not supervised, reminded, or urged, can children learn on their own? How can seven- and eight-year-old children who are playful, hyperactive, and inattentive study without the reminders, tutoring, and close supervision of their parents and teachers? The teachers in *The Rainbow Troops* propose a teaching method opposite to their colleagues in Vietnam. Instead of imparting knowledge that combines testing, monitoring, urging, and reminding, Rector Harfan and Ms. Mus (the only female teacher at Muhammadiyah School) focus on close bilateral interaction between teachers and students. Pre-literate children are always loved and respected. With their teachers, they become creators of the content of each school lesson. Somehow, Mr. Harfan and Ms. Mus, primary school teachers with modest degrees, mastered and used a progressive teaching method similar to modern liberal education that allows for the maximization of the abilities and qualities of each student.

In the first lesson at Muhammadiyah Primary School, Mr. Harfan tells the class three stories: Noah's Ark, the religious wars in Indonesian history, and about the founder of Muhammadiyah Primary School. Through the stories, poor girls and boys realize who the true teacher is, as someone who not only imparts knowledge but they are also their "friend and spiritual guide." Teachers teach students how "to make toy houses from bamboo" and show them how to clean before prayer, and pray before bed. They pump air back into students' sometimes flattened bicycle tires, and even "sucked poison from our legs if we were bitten by a snake, and from time to time made our orange juice with their bare hands" (Hirata 2013: 30) In the children's souls, their teachers are "unsung heroes, a prince and princess of kindness, and pure wells of knowledge in a forsaken, dry field" (Hirata 2013: 30). Likewise, all students are encouraged to cultivate intellectual curiosity by making them ask questions in class. (Hirata 2013: 17). The Rector's teaching method stimulates dialogue, dispels fear, awakens the desire for knowledge, and ignites confidence in the girls and boys who are going to school

for the first time. That results in students feeling “very lucky to have had the opportunity to study at the poor school with the extraordinary teachers who made [them] appreciate education, fall in love with the school, and celebrate the joy of learning” (Hirata 2013: 288). He does not use textbooks and modern teaching aids, nor does he assign homework, but strangely, knowledge naturally “penetrates” into the hearts and souls of his students and builds the fire of love for teachers, school as well as the desire to learn in the children.

Like Rector Harfan, Ms. Mus also regularly uses methods to encourage students to ask questions and give students the right to self-determination. Even one small stuff like electing a monitor also follows what is called a “democratic manner” (Hirata 2023: 81), so even a disabled student like Harun can vote in a special way. Besides, Ms. Mus is also an example of energy and creativity. When there is no chalk longer, she takes the students to the yard, using the ground as a board. When it rains and the classroom leaks, she covers her head with “a banana leaf as her umbrella” (Hirata 2013: 238) to continue teaching the students. Her creativity and spirit of overcoming difficulties are more valuable than reminders, teachings, or whippings because they are intuitive, granting profound lessons that impress upon the pupils.

Educational methods and the effectiveness of education are the core content of the dialogue between *The Rainbow Troops* by Andrea Hirata and *Ticket to Childhood* by Nguyễn Nhật Ánh when placed side by side. Although Vietnam and Indonesia are developing countries with little interaction with the world, the two works show two different teaching methods in the two countries. The democratic and dialogical way of teaching and organizing classes of Mr. Harfan and Ms. Mus at Muhammadiyah School is like a questioning of the educational method that Little Mũi and his friends at a Vietnamese school are receiving. That question neutralizes the power of promoting the role and absolute authority of the teacher, denying the unilateral educational method. Regarding educational effectiveness, it can be seen that the time and effort his teachers, parents, and even Mũi (*Ticket to Childhood*) spend on studying are very expansive but not very effective. Little Mũi and his friends hate

studying, love playing, and are ready to drop out of school because of playing without close supervision. Meanwhile, the method of dialogue, focusing on bilateral interaction between teachers and students in *The Rainbow Troops* brings unexpected results. This teaching method reflects a progressive view of children who have very different talents and interests, and should not be subjected to a uniform and standardized curriculum (Noddings 2013: 210-2159). Thus, every student is cared for, encouraged, and allowed to shine in different ways. The teaching method of Mr. Harfan and Ms. Mus is similar to the modern liberal conception of education that defines it as "individual preparation for *autonomy*" (Winch and Gingell 2004 96) so that educated people are able to make choices about how they are about to live and the value they are going to adopt. Autonomy is not only the freedom to choose how you intend to reach your goals in life but also the freedom of will to set/ establish your own life goals" (Winch and Gingell 2004: 96). With that goal, liberal education focuses on people, for people, all educational activities are aimed towards the autonomy of will and actions so that people become independent, self-sufficient individuals who can determine and be flexible in a changeable society.

The composition of teacher and student characters in *The Rainbow Troops* and *Ticket to Childhood* provokes thought about modern philosophy of liberal education. This progressive educational method can be explained by the unconditional love of those teachers for their students. Mr. Harfan always considers his students "the most precious of Malay children" (Hirata 2013: 17). To praise the student who was good at math, Ms. Mus said, "Full moon, Lintang! Your answer is as beautiful as the full moon" (Hirata 2013: 61). Each student is recognized and evaluated for his or her strengths, such as Mahar being considered a great artist (Hirata 2013: 70), the disabled student Harun receives the highest score for the ethics subject, considered the most valuable subject. In addition to discovering each student's outstanding abilities, Muhammadiyah Primary School's teachers also trust and give students the right to self-determination before each opportunity and challenge. It is the opportunity for girls and boys to develop their intelligence, ability, and will to overcome difficulties, unite the power of friendship, and

create miracles. The Best Performing Arts Award and the First Prize of the Excellent Student Contest in a competition with public and private schools in the region are proof of the effectiveness of the democratic and equal educational method that Mr. Harfan and Ms. Mus apply to their students. The achievements not only confirm that correct educational methods can bring outstanding results but also serves as an antithesis to the viewpoint that children need to be carefully supervised and reminded to gain success. Respecting students, always listening to them, allowing them to express themselves, making free choices, and advocating equality among students and teachers have built a spirit of open dialogue, trust, and love. In addition, the educational method that takes students as the core has lit a fire in their hearts, and that fire continues to be maintained and fanned even when there is no teacher next to them. The spirit of not giving up is a lesson that each member of The Rainbow Troops receives and remembers from the first lessons from their teachers.

Material conditions such as schools, classrooms, books, teaching materials, etc., are widely believed to be important elements of the educational process. However, the juxtaposition of the two educational methods presented *The Rainbow Troops* and *Ticket to Childhood* shows that the correct method is to aim at students, and consider them the central factor of teaching and learning activities. Thérèse Guoin-Décarie is right when she asserts that: "The object of education is children, education that is not suitable for the object has no value" (Guoin-Décarie 2018: 149). In other words, education that is not based on an understanding of students' psychology and physiology, does not respect students as independent individuals who need to be supported and nurtured will hardly be effective. When educators understand and respect children, educational activities take place in a bilateral interaction, each child will be able to maximally develop their intellectual, spiritual, and willful potential and vice versa. The educational process also brings changes in the teacher's intelligence, personality, and will. Thus, the educator also learns. Both teachers and students undergo a process of fruitful educational activities in a beautiful human sense.

V. Conclusion

The juxtaposition of *The Rainbow Troops* and *Ticket to Childhood* shows a colorful picture of education in Southeast Asian countries in the last decades of the twentieth century. The potential "dialogue" between the two works raises many questions about the roles of teachers and learners in educational activities, thereby demystifying the role of teachers, aiming to promote interaction in teaching and learning activities, and equal roles between teachers and students. The dialogue between these works also shows that the power of the educator is limited and education is not the key factor that changes the entire life of each person. To bring about practical effects and meaning, all educational activities need to be based on understanding and respecting the laws of the psychological and physiological development of children/learners, as the principles that progressive educators like John Dewey (USA), Alfred Binet (France), Montessori (Italy) proposed and practiced: "Children's personality is sacred; children's needs must be the foundation for the educational system" (Nguyễn Hiến Lê 1958: 18). In the 21st century, Southeast Asia in particular and Asian countries in general are still striving towards strong economic growth and focusing on investing in education, considering it a "top national policy." The pressure to study and achieve increasingly falls on children in most Asian countries such as Korea, Japan, Taiwan, Vietnam, and Indonesia, causing children to lose many priceless gifts. In that context, the dialogue between *Ticket to Childhood* by Nguyễn Nhật Ánh and *The Rainbow Troops* by Andrea Hirata reveals that children not only need to be nurtured and educated but also need to be loved, and trusted, and given the right to autonomy and self-determination within their scope to gradually create the independent development of free people in the future.

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