Post-Trip Reflective Essay

What Maison Chance Taught Me About Plans, People, and Principles

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I arrived in Vietnam clutching notebooks full of ideas, my mind racing with anxieties about being unprepared. As someone who's never been trained to teach, I thought meticulous planning would compensate for my lack of pedagogical expertise. Planning felt like control, and control felt like respect—as if showing up with everything mapped out would prove I took the students' learning seriously.

That's not what happened.

My teammates weren't planners. We didn't have detailed lesson plans before leaving Hong Kong. When we arrived in Vietnam, we went to the market first—wandering through stalls of craft supplies and stationery, picking up materials that seemed interesting or useful. Then we sat down and asked ourselves: what can we do with what we have?

At first, this terrified me. I kept thinking, "We're wasting time. We should have figured this out already." But something unexpected emerged. Planning with materials in hand, rather than materials to match predetermined plans, made us more creative and responsive. We weren't trying to force our vision onto the students; we were letting possibilities emerge from what was actually available in this specific context.

This shift—from "planning as control" to "planning as responsiveness"—challenged everything I thought I knew about preparation. My translation and social policy training had taught me to analyze, map systems, identify problems, and design interventions. But this experience taught me something different: sometimes the most respectful approach isn't arriving with solutions, but arriving with openness and figuring things out together. The students didn't need our perfectly crafted lessons; they needed facilitators who could read the room, adapt in the moment, and prioritize connection over curriculum.

I realize now that my need for detailed plans was more about managing my own anxiety than serving the students. By planning in Vietnam with local materials and emerging understanding of students' actual interests, we created workshops that felt organic,

adaptable, genuinely collaborative. It wasn't chaos—it was a different kind of rigor, one that privileged responsiveness over prescription.

I had constructed a narrative in my head about who the students at Maison Chance would be. Underprivileged. Facing poverty, disability, ethnic minority status. I expected to encounter students burdened by circumstances, perhaps withdrawn or resentful. I worried they might see us as outsiders who couldn't possibly understand their lives.

I was completely wrong.

The students were joyful—not in a naive way, but with deep contentment that came from feeling genuinely cared for. They were curious about us, eager to engage, quick to laugh. Within days—days!—we had built connections that felt surprisingly real. They teased us, corrected our terrible Vietnamese pronunciation, shared stories, asked about our lives. Maison Chance has clearly created an environment where these students feel safe, supported, and seen.

When it came time to leave, there were so many tears. Theirs and ours. Students who had known us less than a week held on tight, asked when we'd come back, gave us drawings and notes. One student gripped my hand and wouldn't let go, giving us handmade gifts and letters in either Vietnamese or English they translated during their computer lesson, asking if I would remember them. How could I not?

This fundamentally shifted my understanding of what these students needed from us. I had arrived thinking our role was to "help"—to provide educational opportunities they lacked, to somehow compensate for disadvantages. But what they actually responded to was genuine human connection. They needed to be seen as whole people, not as problems to solve or recipients of charity. They needed adults who showed up with curiosity and respect, who were willing to be silly and vulnerable, who treated them as collaborators rather than beneficiaries.

My heart was completely warmed, but I was also humbled. They taught me more than I taught them. They demonstrated resilience without self-pity, joy without denying hardship, and an openness to connection that put my own guardedness to shame. I had worried about whether I could give them anything valuable given my lack of teaching

experience. It turns out what mattered most wasn't pedagogical expertise but willingness to show up authentically—to laugh with them, listen, care.

The question I had wrestled with before the trip—"What right do I have to say this community has a need?"—now feels less abstract. The answer isn't that I don't have the right, or that I do. The answer is that "need" itself is relational and co-constructed. Yes, these students need educational support, medical care, safe housing—all things Maison Chance provides beautifully. But they also need what all humans need: to be known, to matter to someone, to have their dignity affirmed. And that kind of need isn't something I identify from outside and then address; it's something that emerges through relationship.

Looking back, what made me ask that question in the first place reveals something about my own formation. My social policy training taught me to see structural inequalities and question who has the authority to define problems and solutions. My translation background made me hyper-aware of how language and culture shape understanding—and misunderstanding. These disciplines trained me to be suspicious of my own certainty, to recognize how my positionality shapes what I see and don't see. Asking "What right do I have?" wasn't self-flagellation; it was an entry point to understanding my own assumptions, privileges, and limitations. It was necessary groundwork for showing up with humility rather than arrogance.

I came to Vietnam with strong convictions about inclusive education. My social policy background had instilled the principle that segregation—even well-intentioned segregation—can undermine abilities and create unnecessary labels. I believed students with special educational needs (SEN) should be integrated into mainstream classrooms as much as possible, that separating them was a form of exclusion denying their full humanity and potential.

Then I met students with severe SEN at Maison Chance.

I watched staff members work with students requiring intensive, individualized support—students with significant physical and cognitive disabilities who needed constant attention, patience, and specialized care. I observed the focus, energy, and expertise required to support these students effectively. And I began to understand something I had only grasped theoretically: inclusion isn't a one-size-fits-all principle.

For students with mild to moderate SEN, mainstream classroom inclusion with appropriate supports can be transformative. But for students with severe SEN, placing them in mainstream classrooms without adequate resources isn't inclusion—it's abandonment. It asks one teacher to divide attention among thirty students while providing intensive support to one or two students who need it. It disrupts other students' learning. It places impossible demands on teachers. And most importantly, it fails to give SEN students the focused care they actually need to thrive.

This realization was uncomfortable because it challenged my ideological commitments. I had to acknowledge that my previous stance—mainstream classes should accommodate all students—was somewhat naive and, frankly, selfish from the perspective of both teachers and students. It prioritized an abstract principle (inclusion) over concrete realities of what different students need and what teachers can realistically provide.

What I learned at Maison Chance is that true inclusion isn't about physical proximity in a classroom; it's about creating environments where every student receives appropriate support to learn and develop. For some students, that means mainstream classrooms with modifications. For others, it means smaller, specialized settings with higher staff ratios and targeted interventions. Both can be inclusive if designed with students' dignity and development at the center.

The staff showed me what inclusive education actually looks like in practice: not rigid ideology, but flexible, responsive approaches meeting students where they are. They don't segregate students because of prejudice or low expectations; they create specialized learning environments because they have high expectations and know what's required to help each student reach their potential.

This connects to my translation background in unexpected ways. In translation, there's no such thing as perfect equivalence—sometimes you adapt the form to preserve the meaning. Similarly, in education, sometimes you adapt the setting to preserve the principle. The principle is that every student deserves excellent, appropriate education. The setting—mainstream or specialized—should be whatever best serves that principle for each individual student.

Before the trip, I had committed to certain principles: privileging local staff knowledge, eliciting rather than defining needs, awareness on power dynamics, treating problems as co-constructed inquiries. I want to reflect honestly on how these played out.

Privileging local knowledge: I asked questions constantly. What do these students usually enjoy? What challenges should we anticipate? How do you typically handle this? The staff were generous, and their insights shaped our workshops crucially. When planning an art activity, a staff member mentioned some students got frustrated with complex instructions. We immediately split ourselves into small teaching groups with different activities, and it went much better than our original plan would have. This reinforced that my role wasn't importing expertise but collaborating with people who actually knew these students.

Eliciting rather than defining needs: Instead of arriving with assumptions about what students needed to learn, I tried to observe and ask. During our first workshop, I paid attention to what energized students versus what made them disengage. Activities requiring physical movement and interaction generated more enthusiasm than seated, listening-based ones. So we adapted, incorporating more games and hands-on elements. I also asked students directly what they wanted to learn about. Their answers surprised me and pushed us to be more creative than we would have been with our own assumptions.

Awareness of power dynamics: I kept thinking about power dynamics, not just of events but of my reactions and the power dynamics I observed. I reflect on moments I felt uncomfortable—like when students asked for photos, and I worried we were performing the "saviour" role. I noted times when language barriers created asymmetries in who could speak and be understood. I reflected on how our status as university students from Hong Kong positioned us relative to students and staff. These notes helped me stay aware of dynamics I might otherwise have missed.

These practices weren't perfect. There were moments I slipped back into problem-solving mode, moments I didn't ask for feedback when I should have, moments my anxiety overrode my commitment to responsiveness. But naming these practices explicitly helped me notice when I drifted and course-correct.

This trip was supposed to close my final year meaningfully. It did that, but it was also a beginning.

The measure of this trip's success isn't what I gave the students at Maison Chance but what they gave me—new perspectives, challenges to my assumptions, moments of joy and connection that expanded my understanding of what education and care can look like. I arrived anxious about my lack of teaching credentials, worried about planning, and uncertain whether I had anything valuable to offer. I'm leaving with different uncertainties—questions about how to sustain connections across distance, how to support Maison Chance meaningfully from afar, how to translate this experience into future work—but these feel like productive uncertainties, the kind that generate growth rather than paralysis.

I'm not going to be a teacher. My career path will likely take me elsewhere—maybe translation, maybe policy work, maybe something I can't yet imagine. But this experience has convinced me that working with children in need will remain part of my life, whatever form my career takes.

I want to visit Maison Chance again. Not once, but multiple times if I can. I want to stay connected to the students we met, to see how they grow, to support the organization's work in whatever ways my skills and resources allow. This wasn't a one-time volunteer experience to check off a list; it was the beginning of a relationship I hope to sustain.

This experience has given me a framework for how I want to engage with communities and causes I care about:

First, show up with humility and openness rather than solutions. My translation and social policy training give me analytical tools, but they don't give me the right to define others' needs or prescribe solutions. The most valuable thing I can offer is often an authentic presence and willingness to learn.

Second, prioritize relationships over programs. The students didn't need perfectly designed workshops; they needed adults who genuinely cared. Whatever form my future work takes, impact comes through connection, not just intervention.

Third, hold principles lightly while holding people firmly. I came to Vietnam with strong convictions about inclusive education, but I revised those convictions when confronted with students' actual needs. Being open to reconsidering principles—when students' wellbeing is at stake—isn't weakness; it's integrity.

Finally, let myself be changed. The transformation I sought before the trip wasn't something I could engineer through planning or effort. It happened in the spaces between—in unplanned conversations, in students' laughter, in moments when my assumptions collided with reality and reality won.

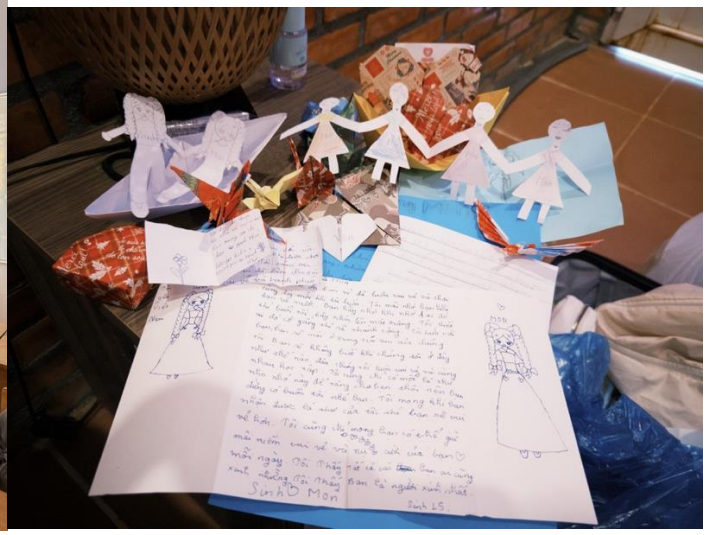
The students at Maison Chance gave me unforgettable memories, genuine relationships, and lessons I'll carry for the rest of my life. They also gave me something unexpected: a sense of direction. I don't know exactly where my career will take me, but I know it will include making space for work with vulnerable communities, approaching that work with humility and responsiveness, and measuring success by the quality of relationships rather than the perfection of plans.

As I graduate and move into whatever comes next, I carry the faces of students who cried when we left, the wisdom of staff who generously shared their knowledge, and the example of an organization that creates genuine inclusive care. I carry gratitude for teammates who taught me to plan differently, and for an experience that challenged me in exactly the ways I needed.

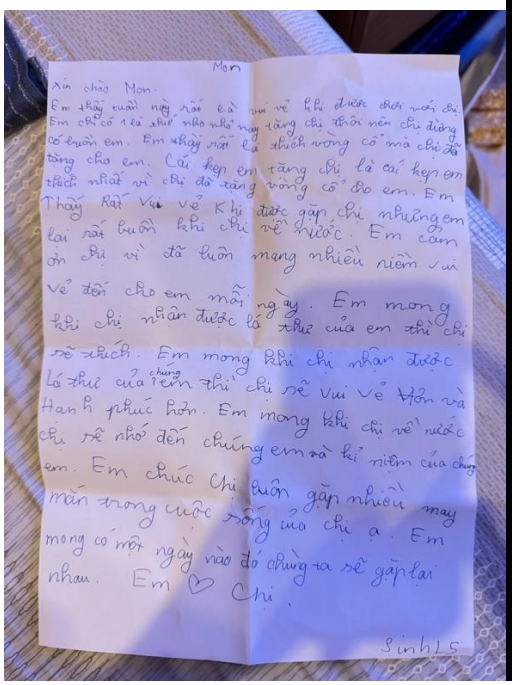
I'm ready for what's next, knowing that part of what's next will always include finding ways to support children like those at Maison Chance—not because I think I can save anyone, but because they've already saved something in me.

(I would like to extend my heartfelt gratitude to Vivien for her dedicated efforts in facilitating this initiative, as well as to the University of Hong Kong for providing us with a course enriched by her resources. This trip has been truly transformative and has created lasting memories for us. I kindly urge continued funding for this initiative, as I sincerely hope that my peers and fellow students at HKU will have the opportunity to benefit from this remarkable experience in the future.)

Photo Highlights of the trip:



Translation of letters:



Hi Mon,

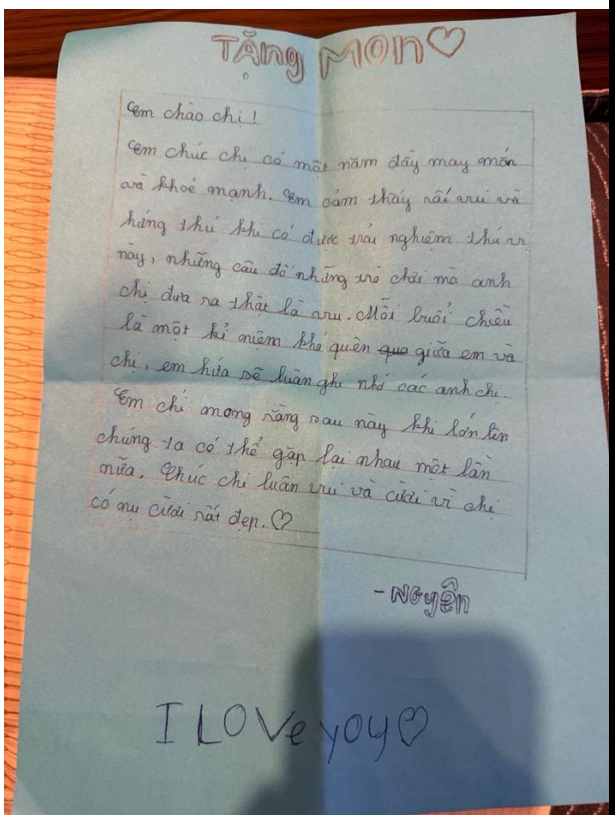
I felt very happy this week when I got to play with you.
I just have one small wish for you, so please do not be sad.
I feel very happy that you like the necklace I gave you.
The hairpin you gave me is my favorite because it is from you and you also like hair accessories.

I was very happy to meet you, but I am sad because you have to leave.
I remember the moments when you always brought smiles to me every day.

I hope when you receive my letter, you will like it.
I hope when you receive something from us, you will feel happier and happier.
And I hope when you return to your country, you will remember us and the memories we had together.

I wish you will always be lucky in your life.
I hope that one day we will meet again.

I love you, Mon.
Sinh L5



Here is a full, careful translation of the letter:

To Mon

Hello sister!

I wish you a year full of luck and good health.
I feel so happy and excited that I got to experience so many new things with you.
The riddles and games that you gave us were amazing.
Every afternoon was an unforgettable memory between us and you.
I promise that I will always remember you and all the older brothers and sisters.

I hope that in the future, when we grow up, we can meet again someday.
I wish you will always be joyful and keep smiling.
Your smile is very beautiful.

– Nguyên

I love you.

Here's the translation of the letter:

"Dear friends,

Thank you very much for the wonderful activities you organized. I felt very happy to meet you. You all are like family to me.

Wishing everyone a lot of joy and happiness. I hope to see you all again soon!

Sincerely,
Co Nhung
Grade 4"