Like Father, Like Son? A Story of Vietnamese Education System Over 30 Years of Transition

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Abstract

From a heart-warming story of a father taking his six-year-old son to the school bus station every day, this article identifies some changes within Vietnamese K-12 education policies in the last three decades (1990–2020) and suggests some implications for primary stakeholders, including policymakers, educators, and school administrators. Thirty years, more school models, more sets of national standardized textbooks, more full-day class sessions, more high-quality facilities and services, yet more inequalities and skepticism—all of these changes will be discussed in detail below. Through this short essay, the authors want to introduce a new book project—in which this essay serves as a prelude—focusing on the emerging trend towards the decentralization process of Vietnamese K-12 education. The book will comprise narratives and analyses of socializing processes in our education system, such as the transition from traditional public schools to modern private and international

schools. With this project, the authors hope to humbly contribute some significant insights into Vietnamese local educational research archives.¹

Hien is a Hanoi-based 36-year-old male university lecturer and manager with a nine-to-five schedule like many other office workers. For the last few months, he has a new daily task: to walk his son to the school bus pickup site up the street every 7 AM sharp. Then, the child will catch the 7:05 bus and head to the school located five kilometers away. Thirty years ago, this exact place used to be Hien's elementary school—the path he walks his son every morning now is nothing unlike that of thirty years ago, where he, too, used to walk to his school. On the same path, are there any differences between the two now-and-then six-year-old boys' footprints?

Choices

In general, the past generation in Hanoi and many other cities in Vietnam (those born in the 1970s–1980s) only had two school options: a local mainstream one within walking distance, just as Hien's school back then, or a district specialized or gifted school several kilometers away. Of course, the latter required a competitive entrance examination, so barely any children were selected to attend these schools. In the 1990s, a majority of Hanoian families were struggling with making ends meet; thus, a local school near home for their children would apparently be a reasonable choice.

These days, apart from those traditional options, parents are able to select alternatives of modern education models: public schools with internationalized curricula, private schools, or international schools with tuition and service fees ranging from low (14 million VND/year for a public school, equivalent to 600 USD/year) to high (50 million VND/year for a private school, approximately 2,100 USD/year), or even extremely high (400 million VND/year for an international school, approximately 17,000 USD/year)², while in the past, most were cost-free or primarily subsidized by the government (Dang & Glewwe, 2018; EBVN, 2018). Schools are not necessarily close to home, as students are used to commuting by bus regularly.

In addition, school curricula and materials also witness stark differences between the old and new generations: the former only had one set of textbooks within a unified national curriculum, while starting from the 2020 school year, there are five sets of textbooks nationwide (and the number could increase in the following years) alongside multiple internationalized curricula (Decree 88/2014/QH13, November 28, 2014; Hoang et al., 2020). Furthermore, schooling today has been offered more autonomy to make adjustments quite easily. Suppose parents are not satisfied with the formal curricula. In that case, they will have handy alternatives: extra classes in virtually all subjects, from practical tools such as foreign languages, coding, and programming, to more general life skills like interpersonal skills or STEM.

Likewise, in terms of operation, schools now are differently administered compared to the past. During the 1980 to 1990 period, formal schooling only accounted for half a day, yet a large proportion of elementary schools now last an entire day, with two sessions in the morning and the afternoon (Dang & Glewwe, 2018). In higher grade levels, although not mandatory, some schools have started to operate on two sessions. Previously, children would finish school, come back home to eat lunch, then self-study, play, or help families with household chores or business (depending on individual circumstances) in the afternoon. In contrast, children nowadays attend full-day sessions: participating in formal class time, having lunch (some are even provided breakfast)^{3 4}, taking a short rest, and enjoying extracurriculars. Virtually all activities take place at school.

At a macro level, quality and equality are essential pillars of any education. Modern-day education may offer more options and become more diverse, convenient, and high-quality. Yet there is one devoid aspect that never equalizes to the same level as that of the bygone days: equality. Compulsory K-12 education back then tended to be free of charge, contrary to today's education options. At present, children can learn English with native teachers, receive small class sizes with modern facilities, or enjoy appetizing school lunches of restaurant-quality. There is only one condition: costs will commensurate with the scale of services. From a service perspective, of course we all understand that "there is no free lunch." However, from an educational perspective, we cannot help but ponder the meaning of "education." It is not solely about supplies and demands, offering knowledge and skills for learners, but also about empowerment and transformation, assisting those with humble starting points in changing their lives. Education in its most original form should be the tool to

tackle social inequalities, not a catalyst to reproduce them or widen the gaps. Nonetheless, our education is encountering increased inequalities as an emerging major education issue (Holsinger, 2005; Trines, 2017).

Lack of trust

Besides equality, trust is also something gradually becoming more scarce. In the old days, parents only needed to greet their children in front of their house, and then the kids left for school. Any six or seven-year-olds at that time would be able to walk to school without any company. Now, if a parent lets their kids go by themselves to the bus stop, many other parents out there would definitely disapprove. Long ago, parents could reassuringly leave their children to the school's responsibilities, whereas many schools now must install surveillance cameras so parents can rewatch the footage of "what teachers had done to their children" if needed. Then, there was only one set of textbooks versus five sets currently (see Appendix). Theoretically speaking, textbooks now compile more diverse knowledge accumulated from the developed countries'. In reality, however, the general public and parents, specifically, still lose trust in many social aspects, including education. And this mistrust apparently does not randomly stem from an unjustified underlying cause.

Thoughts

The previous stories are Hien's cherished insights for over a month after saying goodbye to his son at the bus pickup site and walking back home. Thirty years, same pavé, same nation, same city, same last name, same blood, and same school. Still, different footsteps, different feelings, and different contexts. Hien wonders whether his son will continue to walk his son on this same path to school, just as he does today, in thirty years to come. This father and son story is actually the collective story of Vietnamese education after three decades with waxing and waning. Hopefully until then, the advanced and innovative sides of education at present will scale up, while the existing issues in the story above, if not fortunately tackled, at least will not worsen in the long term.

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Appendix

Versions of Vietnamese textbooks from 1970 to 2021

(1979)

(1985)

(1990)

(1996)

(2002)

(Five sets of textbooks, 2021)

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¹ Pham, H.-H. (2021, January 26). The need for more archivists in Vietnamese academia. RCISS-0121-02. <https://doi.org/10.31219/osf.io/yshau>

² Duong, T. (2019, May 7). So sánh học phí lớp 1 các trường công lập, tư thục và quốc tế. *VnExpress*. Retrieved from <https://vnexpress.net/so-sanh-hoc-phi-lop-1-cac-truong-cong-lap-tu-thuc-va-quoc-te-3919845.html>

³ British Vietnamese International School Ho Chi Minh City. (n.d.). *Thực đơn ăn trưa*. Retrieved February 23, 2021, from <https://www.nordangliaeducation.com/vi/our-schools/vietnam/ho-chi-minh-city/bvis/our-students/student-life/lunch-menus>

⁴ Vietnam-Australia School, Hanoi. (n.d.). *Bán trú*. Retrieved February 23, 2021, from <http://www.vashanoi.edu.vn/News/196/Ban-tru.html>