

Vietnam's education system in transition – the road to quality education

A co-production of Radio the Voice of Vietnam and Deutsche Welle

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Sound Van Mieu, Temple of Literature

Lively bustle at Van Mieu Quoc Tu Giam in the heart of Hanoi, the capital of Vietnam. Foreign visitors as well as school classes admire the ancient architectural style and precious relics of Vietnam's First National University. A place used for teaching talented students from all over the country nearly 1000 years ago.

Vietnam has a proud history of learning. The country's first university opened its doors long before the first stones were laid to build Oxford and Cambridge. Most parents take a great interest in their children's schooling and most children regard doing well in school as one of the top priorities in life. A survey issued by UNICEF, the United Nations Children's Fund Programme in the year 2001 brought to light that Vietnamese children would like to have the one job more than any other when they grow up: a teacher.

"Since my childhood I always wanted to be a teacher because it is so honourable. Our former president Ho Chi Minh once said: The profession of being a teacher is the most respected out of all respected professions in the world. And now having become a teacher I find such an expression completely true."

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Sound machine-gun

Vietnam also has a sad history of military conflicts. Thirty years of war – first the French colonisers, then the Americans troops – have plunged the country economically and socially into troubled waters. It was not before the mid 80's that Vietnam initiated several radical measures to stabilise the country. The Communist Party Congress then launched a far-reaching renewal, admitting

market economy and loosening central planning. This was the beginning of the so called “open door reforms”, commonly known as ‘doi moi’.

As economy grew, so did the birth rate. Since 1975 Vietnam’s population has doubled - to around 80 million today. The population growth has had a deep impact on the age distribution: More than 50% of the population is under 25 years, and way over half of them are children crowding schools and deserve considerable attention in terms of education.

Sound playground in school

In a country where more than 90% of the population can read and write and where primary enrolment is just as high, it would be inappropriate to focus too much on literacy rate and access to education. The vast majority of children is in school and completes lower secondary level.

This makes the quality of education – how, what and where they are learning – a topic of interest.

“We have seen the rapid development in our society at the turn from the 20th to the 21st century. Such development requires changes in the educational sector, we have to cope with the request of modernisation. That’s why Vietnam’s educational sector has to face drastic changes. Our institute has been participating actively in the research, making proposals for the renovation process to our country.”

...says Nguyen Thi Minh Phong, Deputy Director of the National Institute for Educational Strategies and Curriculum Development. The Hanoi based institute is imputed to the Ministry of Education and Training, MOET, and has been commissioned to devise national strategies for a quality reform in the educational sector for the next decades. One major target the institute focuses on is the curriculum at schools.

Professor Dinh Quang Bao, Rector of the Hanoi University of Education emphasises that concentrating on this topic was overdue.

” There have been some major reasons for the introduction of the new curricula and textbooks. First of all, the speed of science and technology in the world have been so fast these days that the previous curricula and textbooks have proven not to be updated to the latest standards in scientific and technological knowledge. Secondly, the teaching methodologies have been completely backward compared to the modern pedagogical theories, especially of developed countries. In our country, the predominant methodology is the teacher-centred learning, the lectures given one-way from the teachers to the pupils. We have to change that into pupil-centred learning in which the students promote their abilities of self-study to acquire new knowledge by themselves. Such changes request fundamental renewal in curricula and textbooks.”

The new textbooks were not introduced to the pupils in all educational levels at the same time. In 2002, the Ministry of Education began phasing in the books, introducing them one year at a time. The first to work with them were the pupils from 1st grade in primary and 6th grade in lower secondary level followed by grade 2 and 7. By the end of 2007 all grades will be supplied with textbooks. What do the children say who already have worked with the new books?

Pupils from different grades

"I like the new textbooks because they are new and easy to understand without too many exercises."

"The new textbooks are very interesting, because they have pictures and we can use the projector. In the past we did not have any pictures and no projector, so now it is much better."

"The lessons are difficult, but with high determinations and efforts they are not so difficult anymore."

Quality teaching begins with good teachers. In the 2003/2004 academic year, about 22 million Vietnamese were taught at educational establishments, the vast majority in primary and secondary level. More than 600.000 teachers are responsible for the well-doing of the children in primary and lower secondary level. To improve quality teaching, the teachers have to be trained in accordance with the new textbooks. This means a change in teaching style.

Professor Dinh Quang Bao believes a drastic change is inevitable.

"We discovered that old-fashioned teaching methodologies have been used for a very long time. So it takes a lot of determination and time to produce some changes in the mind of the people. When we were writing the new textbooks we were baring in mind that we need a new approach. The old style textbooks mostly provide information, and for the modern style textbooks we focused not only on providing information, but also on kind of action programmes for the learners and teachers to make lessons more interesting."

Active learning and participatory methodologies are often still regarded as new and foreign by Vietnamese teachers. The traditional method of teaching is a one-way classroom situation in which the teacher gives information and the student obediently and respectfully receives it. This leads to a considerable amount of dictating, repeating and copying, and much less questioning, group discussion and problem solving.

The vice-principle of a school in the Vinh Phuc province was one of the first to be trained in the teaching methodologies coming along with the new textbooks. She has participated in three courses for grades 6-8, each consisting of a months additional training during the summer-holidays. Her conclusions are positive.

" Luckily I was selected to participate in quite a number of teacher training courses organised by my province in terms of the new curriculum and textbooks."

I find the changes very necessary. It has been facilitating the methodology and activity of the pupils. Some teachers feel uneasy at first when introduced to the new textbooks. But after being trained they find it very fascinating and they say that such new curriculum and textbooks have been very efficient and they get better in teaching the children.”

Instead of promoting memorisation and repetition, Nguyen Thi Minh Hong now encourages dialogue and creativity in her math lessons. Vu Thi Hang, the principle of a primary school in the province of Bac Ninh has made a similar experience.

Not only her students, but also her staff and the parents too are pleased with the outcome of the new teaching contents.

“At first, the parents were worried, saying: ‘Oh this is the first time a new curriculum has been introduced and they are testing this on my child’. In math for example the kids in the first grade now learn to add and subtract up to 100 instead of just 10. The parents believed this to be too difficult. But now they are more at ease seeing that their children manage.”

The German Andreas Dernbach assists in pointing out the importance of teachers for the Vietnamese society. Dernbach has been heading some World Bank projects on teacher training in Vietnam.

“The teachers in Vietnam do a remarkable job. They sometimes teach under very difficult conditions, classes with 30, 40, sometimes 50 pupils in one class, especially in remote areas, highly motivated despite the low salary – so it is really remarkable what they are doing.”

The Vietnamese government is highly committed to education. This is recognisable by the allocations provided to the sector: The social spending as a proportion of total government spending held steady at 30% in the last 10 years. What changed was how that money was divided up. Education became the clear financial priority, while funding for health and social relief fell off. This year saw a 17% flow of the state budget into the educational sector.

Nevertheless, some lament that there are still not sufficient resources. From the total spending for education, 90% are used for paying the teachers' salaries. So there is not much left for urgently needed equipment, says Nguyen Xuan Truong, Deputy Director of the Education Department in the Vinh Phuc Province.

“ We do face difficulties. Especially the financial resources for the infrastructure of our schools are poor... For example, if we had more classrooms, we would be able to arrange for the pupils to study both in the morning and in the afternoon, kind of boarding schools, and if we had more teaching material, more equipment, the changes in curriculum and textbooks would be better.”

He adds that without the support of the parents, some challenges could not be met in educational matters albeit the government is paying much attention to this sector.

“ We have the advantage that the local people in our province are so eager to the schooling of their children. Years ago when our country was at war, the local people contributed lots of money, sacrificing even their housing for the common cause of resistance against the invaders. Nowadays they contribute their land to build schools on and contribute money to buy tables and chairs for the children at school.”

But within the scope of economical possibilities, there is nothing more the Vietnamese government can do, believes Nguyen Thi Minh Phuong from the National Institute of Education Strategies. Although the country is striving towards industrialisation and market economy, it is still one of the poorest countries in the region with a predominantly agriculture society. More than one fourth of the Vietnamese population lives in poverty.

“ Vietnam is still an agricultural country, preparing for industrialisation and modernisation. Our average income per capita is about 400US\$ per year so we must base all our efforts on such a starting point to take a look at the expectations. We have many expectations, but frankly we have financial difficulties. We have to take into consideration the current economic situation of our country to see the importance and focus Vietnam has already paid to education. “

Music

An important issue among Vietnam's parents is the rise of unofficial fees and concerns about overloading children in school. Although most poor children are exempt from regular tuition fees, schools often charge parents a bundle of indirect fees, from construction costs to class funds. These indirect fees culminate in a different form in better-off areas where children find themselves compelled to take private classes after school – either by fierce competition or a desire to stay on the good side of the teacher. Parents are pressured into sending their children into these classes, a situation which upsets Min Thi Hang, the mother of two primary children in Hanoi.

“The current educational situation in Vietnam is based on a life-long tradition of learning: Learning is the most important target in everybody's life and you never can learn enough. But nowadays in the education system pupils do have rights. And I believe that despite the pressure which is been put on the children, they have the right to play. Naturally I want to see my children perform well in school and graduate, so I am forced to accept this system of pressure in order to see my children advance from high standard primary level to quality secondary and high-

school level. If I like it or not, my child has to submit to the same learning methods as others do and take additional classes.”

Nguyen Minh Thuy, mother of an 11-year old daughter in another Hanoi primary school agrees. She criticises that in the course of the educational reforms like introducing new textbooks, the approach to a problem seems to have entirely changed. Former ways of solving a math problem do not seem to exist anymore or are not applicable due to a new approach in the math-textbooks – the traditional approach is not welcomed by the teacher anymore.

“This implicates that when our children have a question, we can’t give them the right answers. This means we have to engage private teachers who can solve the problems with the children which again implies that only people who can carry the financial burden of engaging a private teacher have the opportunity of better learning standards for their children. Private lessons of course mean more time spending for school and additional homework – so there is no time for individual preferences like playing piano or playing football.”

World Bank estimations from 2002 show Vietnam’s richest parents spend over 30 times to what the country’s poorest parents do on extra classes. They also spend far more on textbooks and other learning aids. So they get what they pay for: With hundreds of hours extra schooling, children from wealthier families have a better chance of getting into university than children from poor families. A problem which is immanent in the society, believes Nguyen Thi Hang.

“The problem of overburdening children is not necessarily a governmental issue or a frame the teachers set but a problem parents create themselves. Many of them put a lot of pressure on their own children to learn because they fear otherwise they might not learn enough to visit a good school, to achieve good marks or will not be up to the needs of a modern world, especially when the parents want their children to study abroad. I talked to many parents who share my opinion, but also a lot of them want their children to learn even more, to get additional lessons, to work on more subjects and even get more homework. Just in order to become small stars, climbing up the social and economic ladder regardless of the children’s other needs.“

Sound Teacher’s Day

Students and teachers in a secondary school in the Province of Hoa Binh celebrate Teacher’s Day - an annual opportunity to honour the nation’s pillars of education by giving flowers, making small gifts and singing. The Vietnamese Party and State consider education a top priority and an important driving force behind national construction. But not all have equal opportunities and access to education. Most of those lacking the funds come from the rural areas where almost 75% of the population live. And that too is the homeland of the ethnic minority people.

There are some 53 ethnic minority groups in Vietnam, each with its own culture, history and dialect. They make up 14% of the population which is about 10,5 million people. Rugged terrain, poor transport links and long distances between villages make it harder and more expensive for those children to come to school, as Hoang Van Sit, an Education Officer from UNICEF, explains.

“Parents in urban areas invest much more to their children’s education, whereas those in the remote areas invest less because of the poverty and because of the awareness of the importance of education. And there is also the influence of the local culture and ethnic minority belief – they tend to send their boys rather than their girls to school. Because they say when they invest education to the sons, they get it back when they are old. But when they invest education to their girls, then the girls gets married and they bring the investment to the husband’s family. That is also the psychology of the ethnic minority people.”

To ensure better teaching and learning conditions, the government launched the so-called Programme 135, a policy to help backward communes in remote or mountainous areas to catch up educationally despite cultural influences and low economic conditions. Pupils from these areas do not have to pay tuition-fees or for textbooks, they are granted scholarships and don’t need top marks when applying for enrolment in higher educational institutions. Teachers enjoy higher salaries and better social insurance so they can retire earlier with the same pension teachers get in urban areas.

Doan Thi Lan is the principle of Kim Dong Primary School in the Hoa Binh Province. Her school is located high up in the mountains with a 50% quota of minority pupils from the Thai, Muong, Dao and Tay-people. Despite the benefits for her pupils, there are still some challenges to be met.

“One of my pupils really lives far away, he has to cover a long distance from home to school. It takes him about an hour’s walk to come here. He has to cross a river and a mountain before reaching school.”

As 90% of the budget goes for salaries, there is not much left for new equipment or repairs, especially in poor areas where parents are willing, but not able to raise funds for their children.

“Truly speaking, a lot of the local people here face economic difficulties. Some of them have up to 10 children, so the elder have to go to work to feed the younger ones. When we have a case that children stop going to school, we go and see why he or she is kept home. Some of those families don’t even have proper homes with walls to provide security from the wind, the family doesn’t have any blankets, only little rice to eat, not even pots to cook with.”

Teacher shortage is another problem at her school: Although the MOET has increased the number considerably in the last years, many teachers do not want

to work in remote and mountainous areas but prefer working in lowland schools. Only 7 members of her staff are on the state pay-roll, 20 local teachers work on a contract-basis, says Dan Thi Lan. This is where UNICEF supports the Vietnamese government in changing the approach.

“It is difficult to mobilise the teachers from urban areas to go to the remote ethnic minority and mountainous areas. We see the benefit of the locally recruited and trained teachers, because it is cost-effective and at the same time when the ethnic minority students are trained to become teachers they become the teacher for their own children in their own community, they share the same culture, they understand the children, then it is much easier to teach in that way. So both teacher and students feel more comfortable.”

This is just the way Duong Kim Thu feels. She is a teacher at the Ethnic Minority Boarding School.

“When I was a kid, I had to walk more than 12 kilometres from home to school every day. I did this from grade 1-5At that time, I had the dream to become a teacher so that I could teach the kids in my locality. They would not have to travel so far to enjoy school.”

But not only long distance walks to school is a problem for these children.

“The ethnic minority people come from remote areas, their knowledge of reality is limited. They do not know much about the outer world, so it takes more time for them to prepare the new lessons.”

In future they will have even more time with the introduction of the new curriculum. It demands a rise of daily learning time in school. Instead of a 120-weeks curriculum which was especially designed for ethnic minority children in primary school, the new curriculum demands for 175 school weeks for primary level. The implementation of the so called National Unified Standard Curriculum increases lessons from 15 to 25 hours per week in grade 1-5. There is little question a standardised curriculum that does away with a system under which ethnic minority children learn for three and children from the Kinh majority learn for five hours per day is a step forward. The challenge will be to make it work, having in mind many families depend on the children's labour and cannot compensate for their children staying longer at school.

Ha Phuong Thuy is glad she is staying at a boarding school.

“When I stayed at home, apart from going to school I also had to help my parents with the household. I had to do the cooking, wait for my parents to come back, tend for my younger sisters...But coming here I can concentrate on my lessons.”

Doan Thi Lan, Principle of Kim Dong Primary School in the Hoa Binh Province believes her ethnic minority pupils are up to the new challenges arising from new curriculum and textbooks.

“It takes the kids more time to get along with the new learning methods, for example to practice the Vietnamese language phonetics. But otherwise there is no difference between the abilities of pupils from ethnic minorities compared with the Kinh majority. They do well both. The students selected to participate in the best student competition of the district and the province equally come from both parts of the society.”

Music

In November, the government released a report on the nation’s education system, which was critical of its quality, but outlined many recent achievements. The shortcomings not yet resolved include outdated education methods like rote teaching, continued obstacles for poor and ethnic minority students to access education. The government has taken measures to increase investment in problematic areas, such as building more schools catering for rising educational demands and improving access to education for students in many remote areas. But there still is an overemphasis on obtaining a qualification to the detriment of quality education. Teaching and learning focus too much on exam results to the extent that it fails to encourage creative thinking and in-depth study, the report says.

Professor Dinh Quang Bao, Rector of the Hanoi University of Education adds one crucial point not thoroughly mentioned in the report.

“Vietnam is a nation eager to learn, and the eagerness to learn is much higher than the capacity of the government to meet the demand. Every year we have about 2 million pupils who seek to do the exam for the university out of whom we can only take 160.000. Which means that we can take one student out of every 16 candidates. No wonder the fierce examination causes lot of social issues to settle.”

The fierce competition for places can cause serious depression in those whose applications are rejected. And it creates a perception among the Vietnamese youth that university is the only form of post-secondary education worth pursuing. The Rector of Hanoi’s University of Education therefore postulates more funds for more universities.

“We need to intensify our efforts in higher education level for both quantity and quality, according to the financial means given in the country. But we will also have to accept the imbalance of quality among universities. So the investment cannot focus on all universities or schools at the same level, we will have to

differentiate so we can have a university that is as good as an American or German one.”

There is hope for the future generation of post-secondary graduates applying for university. The pace of population growth is slowing down. Families decide to have fewer children as a result of government family-planning efforts and changing financial priorities in the last 15 years. Most families now have no more than 2 children. But it takes some time until this development has an impact on an easier access to university. And, as Do Dinh Hoan believes, it takes time as well for Vietnam to achieve the target of quality education.

“ It takes time to bridge the gap between research and implementation. And it takes time for our teachers to get acquainted with the changes. It takes time.”

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