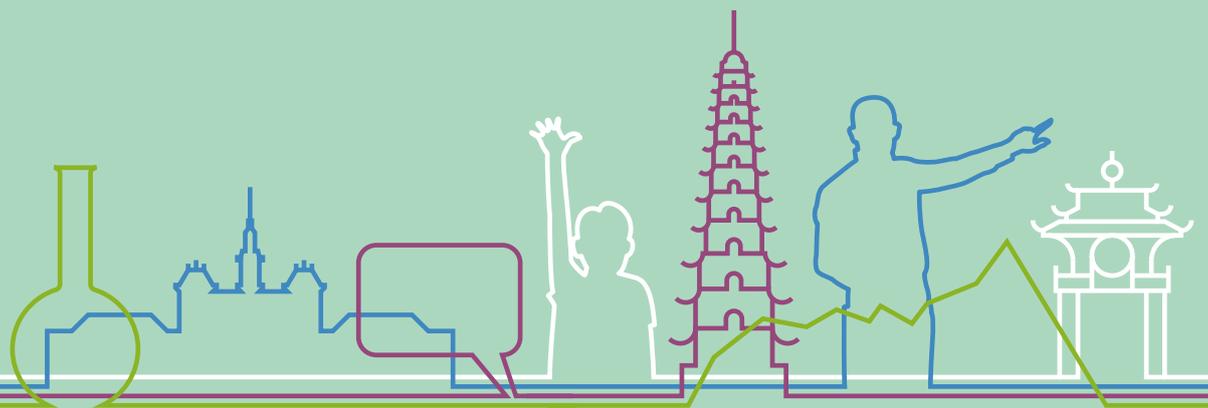


Tony McAleavy, Tran Thai Ha and Rachael Fitzpatrick

Promising practice: government schools in Vietnam



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Education Development Trust Highbridge House, 16–18 Duke Street, Reading, Berkshire RG1 4RU

T +44 (0) 118 902 1000 E enquiries@educationdevelopmenttrust.com W www.educationdevelopmenttrust.com

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The Vietnam Institute of Educational Sciences was established in 1961 to assist the Minister of Education and Training in research on education. VNIES laid a strong foundation for building the Vietnamese education system which aims to be both modern and reflective of national identity. VNIES helps to address issues arising within the education system. Research focuses on educational sciences, educational management, the curriculum, educational policies, development strategies, ethnic minority groups, non-formal education and state management policies in education and training. VNIES also provides Masters and doctoral training in educational sciences. VNIES has nearly 450 employees working within 5 divisions, 10 research centres, 3 experimental institutions and one international school. VNIES also published a journal entitled Vietnam Education Science. The research centre working with Education Development Trust on this project was the Center for Manpower Training Needs Analysis and Forecast (MATNAF).

About the authors

Tony McAleavy is Education Development Trust's Research and Development Director, with corporate oversight of the educational impact of all Education Development Trust's activities and the Education Development Trust public domain research programme. Tony has worked extensively on school reform in many countries, particularly in the Middle East. He has an MA in Modern History from St John's College, University of Oxford.

Rachael Fitzpatrick is a Research Officer at Education Development Trust. In her role she has worked on a variety of projects from school improvement in the UK to teacher intrinsic motivation in Rwanda. Rachael's personal research interests centre on parental engagement in education. She has an MA in Social Research Methods (Social Policy) from Durham University.

Dr Thai Ha received her MA in Education at the Vietnam National University in 1995. Since graduating she has worked as a teacher and a senior researcher on educational development at the National Institute for Education Development in Vietnam. She continued her studies on pedagogy in Germany, receiving her PhD from Potsdam University. She has a wide range of publications in Vietnam, including authoring *Education Strategy of Rural Areas' Households in the Socio-Economic Transformation Context*. Since 2012 Dr Thai Ha has been the director of the Manpower Training Needs Analysis and Forecast Centre in the Vietnam Institute for Educational Sciences (VNIES). She has also worked as a national part-time consultant for VVOB, the World Bank and UNESCO in Vietnam.

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Acronyms and abbreviations

| | |
|---------------|--|
| BOET | Bureau of Education and Training |
| DOET | Department of Education and Training |
| EFA | Education For All |
| ETEP | Enhancing Teaching Education Programme |
| FGD | Focus Group Discussion |
| GDP | Gross domestic product |
| GSO | General Statistics Office of Vietnam |
| MOET | Ministry of Education and Training |
| OECD | Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development |
| PISA | Programme for International Student Assessment |
| RISE | Research on Improving Systems of Education |
| SREM | Support to the Renovation of Education Management |
| UIS | UNESCO Institute for Statistics |
| UK | United Kingdom |
| UNESCO | United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization |
| USA | United States of America |
| VNIES | Vietnam Institute of Educational Sciences |
| VNEN | Viet Nam Escuela Nueva |

Chapter 1

Introduction – Why investigate Vietnam’s school system?



Vietnam's government schools have attracted a great deal of international attention since the publication in December 2013, of the results of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2012 student tests.

Vietnamese students did well in PISA, particularly in the science test. As we shall see, there are reasons for caution about how to interpret Vietnam's PISA results; nevertheless, these results were undoubtedly positive. The PISA results are not the only example of good news from Vietnam. Assessments by the Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) of student outcomes and the Oxford University Young Lives study have also pointed to promising results.

Vietnam has made great gains in enrolment

Not only are there promising indications relating to academic outcomes in Vietnamese government schools, but also the country has made huge strides in terms of enrolment in recent years. Primary and lower secondary enrolment is now close to universal. Upper secondary enrolment has made dramatic gains, from 27% in 1992/93 to over 70% in 2014.¹

As noted in Table 1, progress has also been made in pre-school enrolment.

Primary and lower secondary enrolment is now close to universal. Upper secondary enrolment has made dramatic gains, from 27% in 1992/93 to over 70% in 2014.

TABLE 1: GROSS ENROLMENT RATES PRE-PRIMARY EDUCATION ²

| | 2007 | 2008 | 2009 | 2010 | 2011 | 2012 | 2013 | 2014 | 2015 |
|--------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| Male | 73.61 | 67.54 | 69.83 | 72.05 | 76.71 | 80.19 | 84.72 | 82.71 | 84.12 |
| Female | 61.11 | 67.98 | 67.8 | 69.36 | 71.03 | 76.16 | 78.49 | 79.86 | 82.03 |
| Total | 67.54 | 67.76 | 68.85 | 70.75 | 73.97 | 78.26 | 81.75 | 81.35 | 83.13 |

TABLE 2: VIETNAM NET ENROLMENT RATE BY SCHOOL LEVEL ³

| | 1992–1993 | 2002 | 2010 | 2014 |
|------------------------|-----------|------|------|------|
| Primary school | 85.6 | 93.8 | 96.9 | 98.0 |
| Lower secondary school | 72.3 | 89.8 | 92.6 | 94.8 |
| Upper secondary school | 27.2 | 63.1 | 71.5 | 72.5 |

Gaps in enrolment based on gender or ethnicity have narrowed in the recent past. Enrolment rates for girls in primary and lower secondary were lower than those for boys by about 10 percentage points in 1992–1993. Since 2006, however, girls'

¹Dang and Glewwe (2017, 41) ²UIS (2018) ³Dang and Glewwe (2017, 41)

enrolment has consistently exceeded that of boys at all levels. Enrolment gaps between the ethnic majority group (known as Kinh) and ethnic minority groups have narrowed at primary level since 1992. However, the ethnicity enrolment gap at lower and upper secondary levels has persisted. The fact that some ethnic groups are underrepresented at secondary level is one reason for caution when interpreting PISA results.⁴

Evidence of encouraging academic results before PISA

Vietnam's performance in PISA has attracted extensive commentary. Less attention has been given to the fact that, before publication of the PISA 2012 results, data had already begun to emerge that was hinting at the possibility that government schools in Vietnam were achieving good academic outcomes in core subjects for many students. In partnership with the World Bank, in 2001 and 2007 MOET conducted large-scale national assessments of Grade 5 reading and mathematics performance. These assessments produced encouraging results. The majority of Grade 5 students were operating at a level of 'functional' or above in reading and mathematics in 2001. There was then a significant improvement in performance between 2001 and 2007.⁵ The apparent improvement in performance levels was achieved at a time of increasing enrolment, indicating the possibility of a simultaneous improvement during this period in terms of both access and quality.

The Oxford University Young Lives data

Further, largely encouraging, data has emerged from the Oxford University Young Lives study, which has tracked the lives of a sample group of children in Ethiopia, India, Peru and Vietnam since 2002, with primary funding from the UK Department for International Development. In 2013, before the announcement of the 2012 PISA results, the Young Lives team published a study of the progress made by a sample of Vietnamese Grade 5 students during the school year 2011–2012. In a blog published shortly after the publication, Young Lives Director Jo Boyden described the performance of the Vietnamese students as 'truly exceptional':

Pupil performance in Vietnam (where per capita GDP [gross domestic product] is broadly similar to that of India) is truly exceptional. Around 19 out of every 20 ten year-olds can add four-digit numbers; 85% can subtract fractions and 81% are able to find X in a simple equation. The education system in Vietnam is relatively equitable and this means that poorer children can expect a decent quality of schooling. Our data show children from disadvantaged as well as average or better-off backgrounds make good progress in classes taught by motivated and well-trained teachers. Teachers are evaluated six or more times a year and they assess their pupils regularly. Few teachers, including those working in disadvantaged neighbourhoods, perform poorly in assessments of their knowledge for teaching grade 5. Most classrooms have electricity and more than 96% of pupils have core textbooks for their own use. Both teacher and student absenteeism averaged only two days over our study period of 8 months.⁶

The Young Lives investigation of Grade 5 performance 2011–2012 showed that the performance gap between ethnic majority and ethnic minority students within this sample had narrowed dramatically during the year.

Young Lives
Director Jo
Boyden described
the performance
of the Vietnamese
students as 'truly
exceptional'

⁴Dang and Glewwe (2017) ⁵MOET (2011) ⁶Boyden (2013)

TABLE 3: YOUNG LIVES, GRADE 5 COHORT, 2011/12, BY ETHNICITY ⁷

| | Mathematics | | | Vietnamese language | | |
|------------------------|-------------|----------|-------|---------------------|----------|-------|
| | 1st test | 2nd test | Gain | 1st test | 2nd test | Gain |
| Kinh | 509.59 | 546.05 | 36.46 | 511.65 | 518.29 | 6.64 |
| Ethnic minority | 434.01 | 497.91 | 63.90 | 420.16 | 483.30 | 63.14 |
| Difference | 75.58 | 48.14 | 27.44 | 91.49 | 34.99 | 56.50 |

Another Young Lives study considered this same data for the 2011–2012 school years. In 2014, Woodhead et al. suggested several possible reasons for the apparent success of Vietnamese government schools:

One interpretation of these results links to the observation that Vietnamese teaching was focused on the class (as a whole) achieving to an acceptable level, rather than increasing the stretch of the most able individuals. Further the Vietnamese curricula appeared well suited to appropriately develop children's ability, rather than being over-ambitious. It is also apparent that the qualification levels of teachers in poorer areas tend to be quite similar to those teaching in more advantaged areas, which is probably due to centralised teacher training system.⁸

The PISA evidence

The PISA 2012 test scores showed Vietnamese students doing well, particularly in the science test, where they ranked eighth out of a total of 65 participating jurisdictions.⁹ Vietnam's students also did well in PISA 2015, especially in science, maintaining eighth position in the subject.

The PISA 2012 test scores showed Vietnamese students doing well, particularly in the science test

TABLE 4: PISA 2012 VIETNAM SCORE COMPARED WITH OECD AVERAGE ¹⁰

| | Science | Mathematics | Reading |
|----------------------|---------|-------------|---------|
| Vietnam score | 528 | 511 | 508 |
| OECD average | 501 | 494 | 496 |

TABLE 5: PISA 2015 VIETNAM SCORE COMPARED WITH OECD AVERAGE ¹¹

| | Science | Mathematics | Reading |
|----------------------|---------|-------------|---------|
| Vietnam score | 525 | 495 | 487 |
| OECD average | 493 | 490 | 493 |

There was a decline in performance in Vietnam in PISA between 2012 and 2015 in mathematics and reading. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) commentary suggests, with regard to the mathematics scores, that this was probably a result of changes to the test methodology rather than representing a real decline in standards:

⁷Rolleston et al. (2013, 21) ⁸Woodhead, Dornan and Murray (2014, 23) ⁹OECD (2013) ¹⁰OECD (2013) ¹¹OECD (2016a)

The negative changes between PISA 2012 and PISA 2015 reported for... Viet Nam (-17 score points) are, to a large extent, due to the use of a different scaling approach. Had the PISA 2012 results for mathematics been scaled with the PISA 2015 calibration sample and the PISA 2015 approach to scaling, the differences in results for... Viet Nam would have been only... -4 points... and most likely would not have been reported as significant.¹²

The OECD suggests that one of the most impressive aspects of Vietnamese performance in PISA is the relatively high performance of many disadvantaged children

The OECD suggests that one of the most impressive aspects of Vietnamese performance in PISA is the relatively high performance of many disadvantaged children. Commenting on the 2012 results, OECD's Senior Representative, Andreas Schleicher, stated:

Almost 17% of Vietnam's poorest 15-year-old students are among the 25% top-performing students across all countries and economies that participate in the PISA tests. By comparison, the average across OECD countries is that only 6% of disadvantaged students are considered 'resilient' by this measure.¹³

The 2015 PISA results also indicate that the performance of economically disadvantaged students within the Vietnamese sample was particularly impressive.¹⁴ The OECD describes disadvantaged students who did well academically despite their disadvantage as 'resilient'. In 2015 as in 2012, the OECD calculated that the percentage of 'resilient' students in Vietnam was much higher than the OECD average.

TABLE 6: PISA MEASURE OF STUDENT RESILIENCE AND SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS

| | OECD average | Vietnam |
|---|--------------|---------|
| Resilient students (defined as students in the bottom quarter of the PISA 'index of economic, social and cultural status' who perform in the top quarter of students internationally in science), after accounting for socio-economic status (%). ¹⁵ | 29.18% | 75.51% |
| Science performance of students who are in the lowest 10% on the international economic, social and cultural status index. ¹⁶ | 388 | 504 |

Need for caution when interpreting the PISA data

Some commentators have criticised what they see as an over-simplistic reading of the PISA results. John Jerrim, for example, has suggested that Vietnam's position in the PISA 'league table' is inflated by the exclusion from the survey of many students from upper secondary education.¹⁷

The OECD, which organises PISA, has also urged caution. In its view, the Vietnamese results are encouraging but need to be seen in the context of the exclusion of many of the age cohort from the survey. The OECD commentary repeatedly emphasises this point, stressing that the distinctive nature of the Vietnamese sample makes generalisations and comparisons difficult. The OECD also makes the point that, while disadvantaged students in school often do extremely well, the fact that many disadvantaged students do not have access to a full secondary education means the Vietnamese education system cannot be considered overall to be 'equitable'.¹⁸

¹² OECD (2016c, 6) ¹³ Asadullah and Perera, (2015) ¹⁴ OECD (2016a) ¹⁵ OECD (2016a, 46) ¹⁶ OECD (2016a, 403) ¹⁷ Jerrim (2017) ¹⁸ OECD (2016a, 61, 211, 266 and 238)



The PISA sample for Viet Nam covers only about one in two of its 15-year-olds – a reflection of inequities in access to secondary education in that country... While the PISA results are representative of the target population in all adjudicated countries/economies, including Viet Nam, they cannot be readily generalised to the entire population of 15-year-olds in countries where many young people that age are not enrolled in lower or upper secondary school.

Caution is needed when making performance comparisons between countries with very different coverage rates. Assuming that students omitted from the PISA samples are likely to perform at lower levels than students represented in the samples, comparisons will likely be biased in favour of countries with lower coverage rates.

In Viet Nam, for instance, there are fewer low-achieving students in school than on average across OECD countries; but the PISA target population represents less than 50% of the overall population of 15-year-olds in Viet Nam.

Viet Nam... cannot be characterised as an equitable school system since only 49% of its national population of 15-year-olds is represented by the PISA sample.

Young Lives data and the persistence of marked regional and ethnic variations

During the school year 2016–2017 Young Lives collected data in Vietnam on Grade 10 students' performance in mathematics and functional English.¹⁹ Overall, the sample of students made an impressive learning gain during the year in mathematics, with a mean test score scaled at 500 at the beginning and a test score of 527 at the end of the year. The students made a significant, but more modest, improvement in English. The mean test score at the start of the year was scaled at 500 and by the end of the year the mean score was 509.

This Young Lives study of Year 10 students is also striking for the evidence it generated of marked regional variations in student performance. The overall performance of all students in English at the start of the year, scaled at 500, masked marked regional variations. Students in Da Nang province averaged 556, whereas those in Lao Cai scored on average 409.

The study also indicates marked differences overall in the performance of students from different ethnic backgrounds. At the start of the year the mean score of Kinh ethnic majority students in the mathematics test was 509, compared with a score of 409 for ethnic minority students.

The [Young Lives] study indicates marked differences overall in the performance of students from different ethnic backgrounds

Vietnam's education system

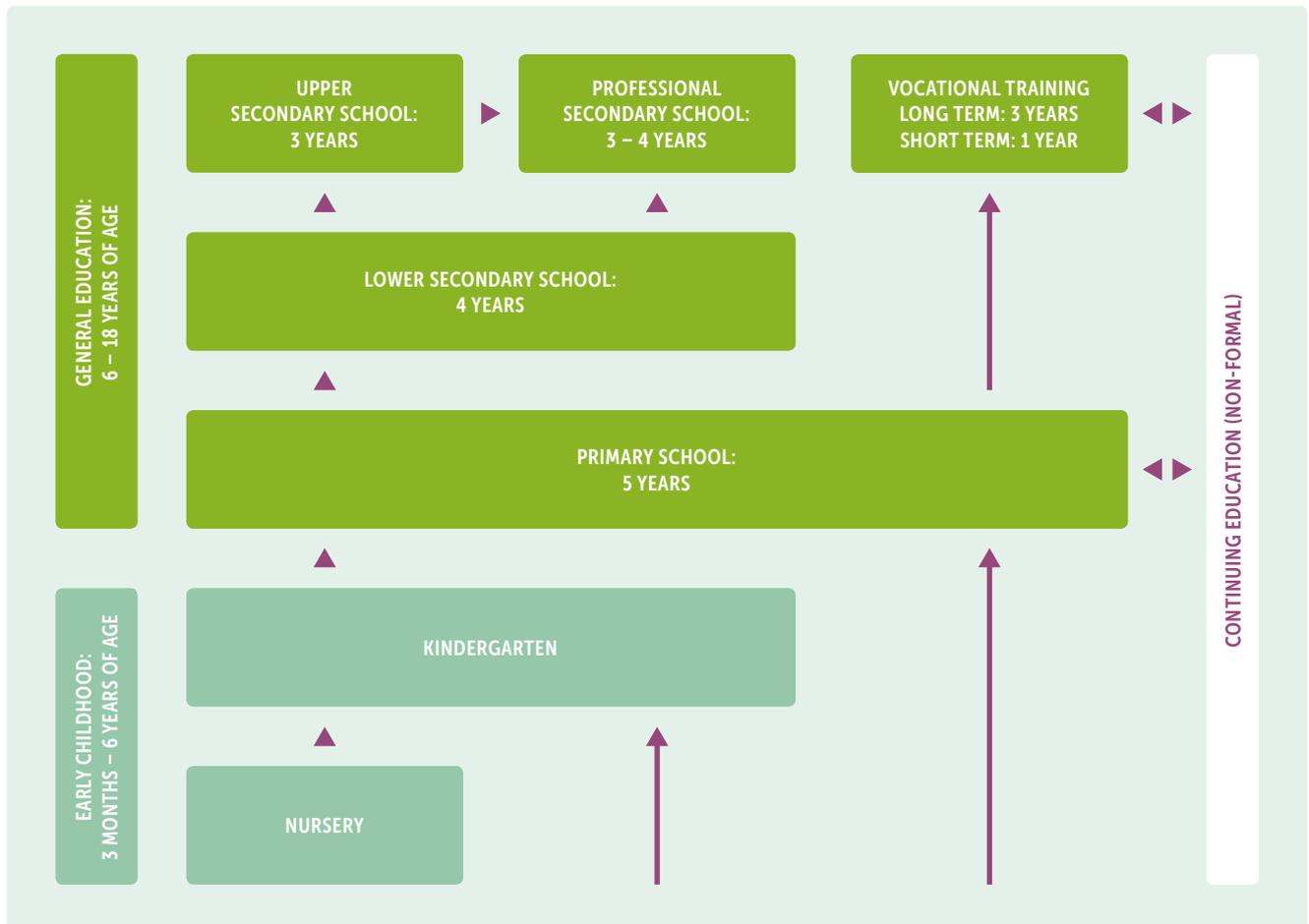
In Vietnam the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) oversees the education sector and is responsible for setting policies for all levels. The country has 58 provinces and five metropolitan municipalities with 'provincial' responsibilities for school education. Each of these 63 local government bodies has a Department of Education and Training (DOET) responsible, under the aegis of both MOET and Provincial People's Committees, for upper secondary school education. Within each province and metropolitan municipality there is also a series of district-level Bureaus of Education and Training (BOETs) supervising primary and lower secondary

¹⁹ Iyer, Azubuike and Rolleston (2017)

education. Each province and metropolitan municipality has between nine and 30 BOETs; in January 2018 there was a total of 713 BOETs across Vietnam.

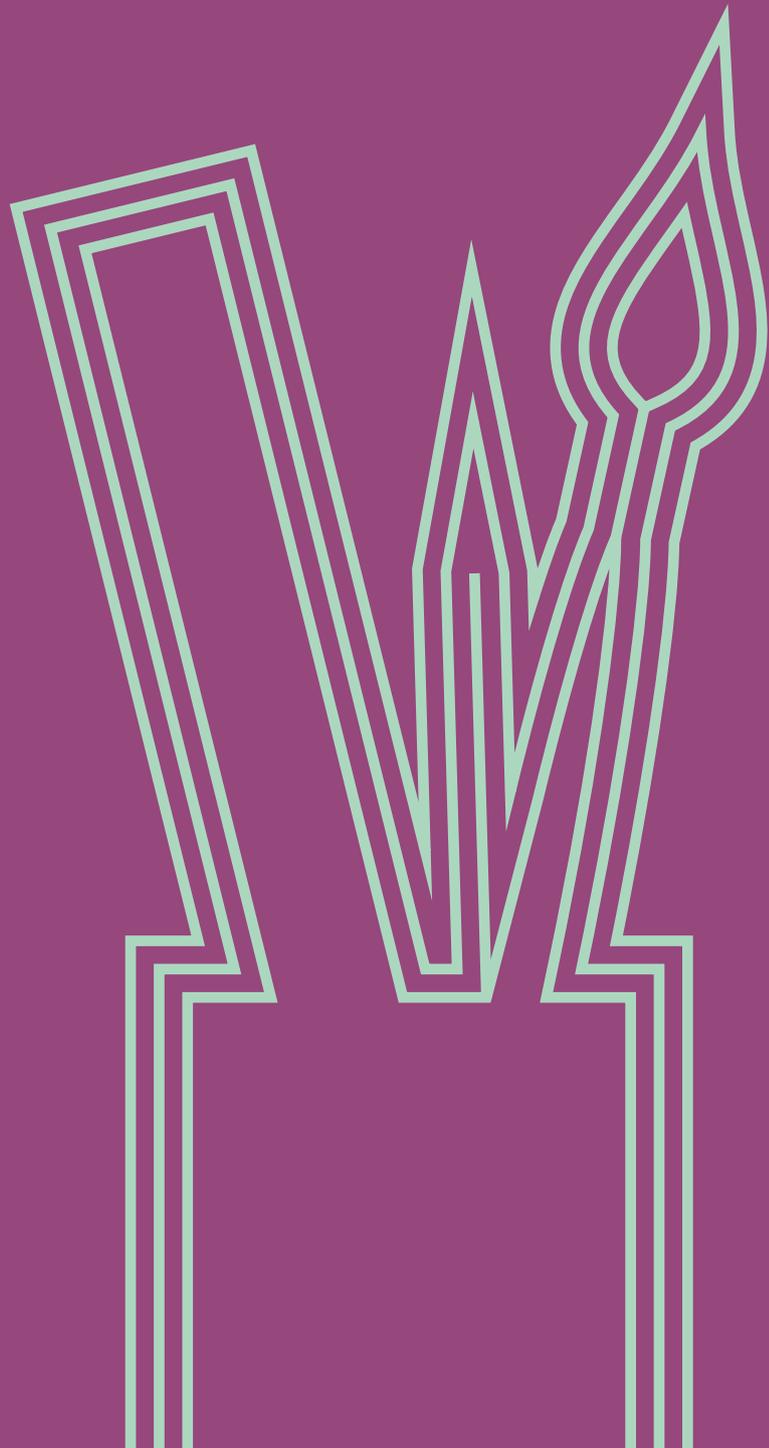
There is a pre-primary kindergarten sector for children aged three to five years. In recent years the government has ensured that most children have at least one year of kindergarten education before starting school. Primary education covers Grades 1–5, from age six. Lower secondary schools serve Grade 6–9. There is a variety of types of upper secondary provision for Grades 10–12.

FIGURE 1: STRUCTURE OF THE EDUCATION SYSTEM IN VIETNAM



Chapter 2

Promising practice – Some distinctive aspects of the Vietnamese school system

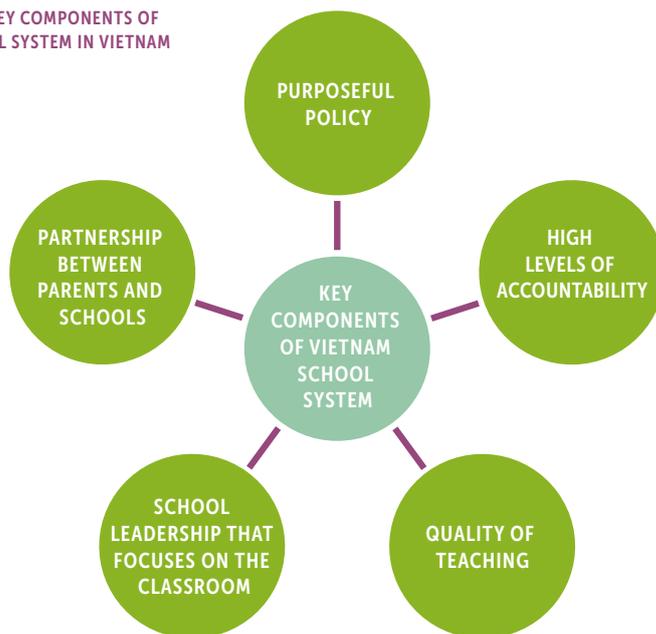


We have identified five interesting features of the Vietnamese school system that emerged from our investigation. Our study explores each of these in some detail.

While each of the five factors is the subject of a separate chapter, it is important to emphasise the interrelationship between the components. National policy created the framework for the development of the accountability regime and mandated measures intended to improve teaching, school leadership and parental partnership. The three most important groups of ‘agents’ at school level – teachers, principals and parents – interact at local level and, according to regulations, all three are involved in the accountability system.

In this chapter we provide an overview of our findings relating to each of the five highlighted key components of the school system in Vietnam.

FIGURE 2: KEY COMPONENTS OF THE SCHOOL SYSTEM IN VIETNAM



The three most important groups of ‘agents’ at school level – teachers, principals and parents – interact at local level and, according to regulations, all three are involved in the accountability system

Purposeful policy

School education: a top policy priority for many years

The government of Vietnam has consistently stated, over many years, that school education is a national priority. Official statistics indicate that spending on education has been relatively high compared with other forms of public expenditure during the past two decades, and there has been a longstanding

commitment to devote at least 20% of all public spending to education. Since the 1990s government spending has also been supplemented by contributions in cash and in kind by parents and businesses under the terms of the so-called policy of ‘socialisation’.

The motive behind the decision to make education a priority was economic. The government believed, and believes, that the scale and quality of the education system will determine economic success and secure Vietnam’s transition from a low-income, largely agrarian, country to a much wealthier country with a thriving diverse economy. Remarkable growth in the size of the Vietnamese economy since the 1990s has increased government tax revenues and thereby the value of the commitment to ‘20% of all public spending’.

The government’s theory of action

The government of Vietnam has been consistent not only in identifying education spending as a priority but also in the way the money has been spent. There has been since 2000 a twin-track approach, addressing both access to school and the quality of learning in schools.

Great strides have been made in improving enrolment rates. In 1992 86% of eligible children were enrolled in primary schools; by 2014 this proportion had reached 98%. There has been an even more marked improvement in lower secondary enrolment, from 72% to 95% during the period 1992–2014. Challenges remain. In many schools students are taught only for a half-day shift. Meanwhile, although enrolment in upper secondary schools has increased sharply since the 1990s, many children still do not have access to a high school education.

Increased enrolment required increased amounts of school places and school buildings. Many of our witnesses described to us how school buildings and equipment had changed for the better in recent years. Underpinning government policy, though, has been an assumption that more, better school buildings are not enough. Decent school buildings are a necessary but not sufficient condition for school quality and good learning.

In the twin-track approach, then, expanding and improving facilities and available school ‘seats’ has been combined with attempts to improve, simultaneously, some of the key factors likely to influence school quality, such as the school readiness of five year olds, the pre-service qualification level of teachers and the quality of teaching. Since 2000 the government has invested in public kindergartens so that now almost all children have spent a year in kindergarten before beginning primary school. There has been a consistent policy emphasis on encouraging teachers to use more engaging pedagogical techniques in the classroom and, in the process, encouraging higher-order thinking on the part of students, although the impact of this policy is contested. The government has also raised the pre-service training requirements for teachers at all levels of the pre-school and school system. Across many interventions, the government has repeatedly emphasised the importance of closing the opportunities–outcomes gap between the Kinh majority and Vietnamese people from other ethnic minority groups.

Better school buildings are not enough. Decent school buildings are a necessary but not sufficient condition for school quality and good learning

Policy implementation and the role of ‘the middle tier’

All governments face a policy delivery challenge. As expert on school reform Seymour Sarason pointed out many years ago, when describing the failure of much educational reform in the USA, schools are often ‘intractable to change and the attainment of goals set by reformers’.²⁰ Simply issuing edicts ordering change is not enough. There is a need for an effective policy delivery system and a functioning middle tier that mediates between central government policymakers and professionals working on the frontline.

Primary schools and lower secondary schools are supported and monitored by a district-level BOET, whereas government high schools are supervised in a similar way by a provincial-level DOET. BOET and MOET officials are expected to explain policy to schools and provide both support and monitoring to ensure fidelity of implementation.

According to the regulations, the process is two-way. Our witnesses often described the interaction between schools and the state as ‘the logical system’. They saw the ‘logical system’ as being simultaneously both ‘top down’ and ‘bottom up’. Mandated policies are cascaded down from the national government to schools via DOETs and BOETs. Meanwhile, according to our witnesses, there is in place a feedback loop that involves the rapid reporting of frontline views on implementation problems up the system through the middle tier to the national ministry.

Within the architecture of the school system, the school principal has a pivotal role as the interface between the school community and the external state authorities, and is highly accountable for local management of any mandated changes.

Principals are expected to work closely with either DOET or BOET to ensure policies are implemented ‘correctly’. They are also expected to provide honest feedback on problems related to policy implementation when they report to either DOET or BOET.

A lively professional and public debate on education

There is a prevalent respect for hierarchy in much of Vietnamese society, and the education system also has many hierarchical features. At the same time there is evidence of a lively professional and public discourse on education. As we discovered, teachers and parents are not afraid to speak openly about their concerns.

Our witnesses, particularly teachers and school principals, frankly identified the problems they faced implementing policy. This hints at the existence of a professional culture within which many teachers and principals are fundamentally conscientious and compliant but also not afraid to identify to their superiors the practical difficulties they face in policy implementation.

The education system is also responsive to an energetic public debate on education policy that is reported widely in the media.

In some ways the government encourages professional and public debate. For many years the central government has campaigned, for example, against the so-called ‘achievement disease’ – that is, the perceived widespread preoccupation that the ‘achievement’ of good grades can cause undesirable consequences, including, at worst, different forms of gaming and cheating.

Within the architecture of the school system, the school principal has a pivotal role as the interface between the school community and the external state authorities, and is highly accountable for local management of any mandated changes

²⁰ Sarason (1990, xiii)

High levels of accountability

The accountability of teachers begins with self-review and peer assessment

Vietnamese teachers are highly accountable. Regulations require that they be involved in a continuous cycle of professional review based on in-school monitoring systems. The classroom performance of every teacher is formally graded on a regular basis through self- and peer review, including lesson observation. Teachers are required by regulation to analyse their own personal strengths and weaknesses.

It was clear from many of our interviews with teachers that the 'subject group' was significant in the way that accountability operates at school level. Each teacher is a member of a subject group. Teachers within each group, working collectively, check and moderate self-review grades. The results are reported upwards to the school principal.

Every subject group has a designated leader known as the 'subject lead'. This middle management role is pivotal to the design of the system of peer review. Our interviews suggested that subject leads often combined an accountability function with a strong orientation towards professional development. The system is intended to be collaborative. Subject leads undertake lesson observations and feedback sessions in conjunction with other members of the subject group, so that all teachers participate in the peer review process.

The principal as an in-school inspector

The school principal plays a central role in the accountability process. Our witnesses described how principals received regular reports about each individual teacher from the subject lead. If a teacher receives 'excellent' or 'poor', the top and bottom grades on a four-point scale of quality, in the peer review, the school principal must verify this. In addition, school principals play a direct role in monitoring the quality of teaching through classroom observation of teachers at work.

Teachers described to us how principals made both planned visits and occasional 'unannounced' visits. From the perspective of our witnesses, the monitoring of classroom quality is an essential task for school principals. Classroom observation was described as both a form of monitoring and a source of professional learning. Principals, as with subject leads, were expected to grade performance but also to provide advice on ways of improving professional performance.

The PISA 2015 survey of principals in Vietnam reinforced the importance for school principals of direct monitoring of teacher quality. The percentage of Vietnamese principals reporting the use of classroom observation by principals or senior staff for the purposes of monitoring teaching quality was one of the highest in the world, and some way above the average for the richer OECD countries.

Parents are encouraged by the government to hold schools to account

The World Bank in its influential 2004 World Development Report articulated the idea that 'the short route of accountability' was potentially a powerful mechanism for improving public services.²¹ The 'short route' requires service users – such

The classroom performance of every teacher is formally graded on a regular basis through self- and peer review, including lesson observation

²¹ World Bank (2004, 154)

as the parents of schoolchildren – to have a ‘voice’ within local accountability systems. At least in theory, parents in Vietnamese government schools have such a voice.

Government regulations state that each government school should have a Parent Board, which must meet at least three times a year. MOET regulates the constitution of these Parent Boards. There should be a Parent Committee at the level of every class, and representatives of these should sit on the whole school-representative Parent Board. The regulations state that the Parent Board should play an active role in the school. They are legally responsible for providing feedback on educational quality to the professionals in the school and for organising extra-curricular enrichment activities. The teachers and principals we interviewed described, based on their experience, the ‘hands-on’ approach of some of these Parent Boards, whose activities included such things as the monitoring of teaching quality and checking on, for example, the quality of school lunches.

One distinctive aspect of the Vietnamese regulations for government schools is the way they describe a two-way form of parental accountability: the power parents should have in holding professionals accountable and the power of school expectations of parental support. The same regulations that set out the role parents have in holding schools to account also state that parents should be held to account for ensuring their own children’s good behaviour and hard work in school. The parents are entitled to ask difficult questions of the work of the professionals but are also personally responsible ‘for their children’s mistakes and faults’.

Expert witnesses we interviewed offered a note of caution in the interpretation of government regulations regarding Parent Boards. They suggested that in practice there was a degree of inconsistency in how far the ‘theory’ of the regulations was consistently implemented.

A robust regime of external accountability

One of our witnesses, a secondary school principal from Ha Giang province, said, ‘*My work is monitored by many parties.*’ This does not appear to be an exaggeration. As well as internal monitoring, the functioning of government schools is also subject to close, external scrutiny. Depending on the phase, schools are supervised closely by either DOET or BOET. Schools are also answerable to local representatives of the Communist Party.

The principals we interviewed described frequent regular meetings in which they reported on progress to DOET or BOET officials. In addition to this regular monitoring, schools are formally inspected at least once every five years, with more frequent inspections for schools causing concern.

Within each school there is also a political Board that monitors its work. In addition to the principal and vice principal, Board members include representatives of the local Communist Party and the teachers’ Trade Union. These Boards have, by law, wide-ranging powers, including ‘the monitoring of school activities’.

One distinctive aspect of the Vietnamese regulations for government schools is the way they describe a two-way form of parental accountability: the power parents should have in holding professionals accountable and the power of school expectations of parental support

The quality of teaching and teachers

Teachers are members of a highly respected profession but they consider themselves badly paid, and many supplement their income by working as private tutors

In Vietnamese society teaching is highly respected as a profession. Many of the teachers we interviewed made it clear to us that they were proud to be members of such an important profession. When describing the characteristics of a good teacher they emphasised the ethical dimension and the importance of idealism, before describing the technical pedagogical skills that a highly effective teacher should have.

The teachers we interviewed consistently stated that they were badly paid, although they also recognised that pay had improved in recent years. Some were disillusioned and said they were both highly accountable and also very badly paid.

Teachers receive an incremental pay rise based on years of service, which means the most experienced teachers can be paid over three times as much as new teachers. Bonuses are available for teachers whose performance is deemed excellent but, in the eyes of many teachers, the financial value of these is low.

It seems clear that many teachers supplement their income by working after school as private tutors. We undertook a survey of 350 parents from four provinces. A total of 77% of them were paying for private tutors and almost all of these private tutors were 'by day' government teachers. Our sample is unlikely to be representative of Vietnamese parents as a whole, as the parents we surveyed were overall more economically advantaged than the general population. Nevertheless, this response strongly supports the hypothesis that private tutoring is very common. Although the government has for many years publicly disapproved of teachers giving these 'extra classes', private tuition remains prevalent, and for many teachers private tuition probably contributes a substantial part of their income and helps in their retention within the system.

It seems clear that many teachers supplement their income by working after school as private tutors

The teacher workforce is better qualified than before and well regarded by many parents

Many of our witnesses felt that the quality and qualification level of the workforce had improved in recent years. After 2000, the government systematically sought to raise the pre-service qualification level for all Vietnamese government school teachers and pre-school teachers, while also providing a 'catch-up' series of summer institutes for existing teachers. Minimum standards for teacher training were established for each phase of the education system. Teaching today is much more 'professionalised' than at the start of the century, with many more teachers qualified at graduate or post-graduate level or engaged in post-graduate study as part of their professional development.

Evidence from PISA 2015 supports the suggestion that some Vietnamese teachers have a good level of subject-related knowledge. The survey of school principals that PISA undertook suggested that in science lessons students in Vietnam were more likely than students in OECD countries on average to be taught by a teacher with a degree and major in science. According to principals, in Vietnamese schools

attended by 15 year olds, 92.4% of science teachers possessed a university degree and a major in science. This is a very high figure in international terms and well above the OECD average of 73.8%.²²

We asked our panel of 350 parents from four different provinces in Vietnam to compare schools today with the schools they themselves had attended as children. They were strongly of the view that the quality of the teaching workforce had improved. A total of 88% stated that in terms of experience the teachers of today were better than those who had educated them; 85% considered that teacher attitudes today were better than when they were at school.

The 'subject group' is an important mechanism providing informal in-school professional learning

Teachers in Vietnam are required by regulation to take personal responsibility for their professional development. Circular 32 of 2011,²³ for example, states that teachers must act to improve their capacity and the quality of their teaching. Teachers are expected to design and implement an annual personal professional development plan for the year based on feedback from the performance management system. The school principal monitors the plan and must ensure teachers are engaging in development programmes every year.

The teachers and principals we interviewed described how informal professional learning took place regularly through the work of the subject group. The subject group provides a forum for professional development based on classroom-level peer monitoring and coaching. Visits from the subject team are part of the accountability regime but they are often welcomed because of the developmental, problem-solving approach that is adopted. The regular classroom visits that principals make to observe teaching also represent an important form of pedagogical coaching for teachers. Whether visits are formal or informal, in each case the outcome is expected to be some form of diagnostic professional feedback.

The PISA 2015 data also points to the prevalence of in-school mentoring of teachers, including that almost all Vietnamese teachers in the sample were involved in mentoring relationships – a much higher rate than the OECD average.

Training related to government initiatives is usually provided through a traditional cascade system, whereby a designated lead teacher attends off-site training and then leads school-based training workshops. In recent years the government has expressed dissatisfaction with the quality of formal in-service training for teachers. With support from the World Bank, it set up a national project called the *Enhancing Teaching Education Programme* (ETEP), to run from 2016 to 2021. ETEP is based on the view that formal professional development has typically been weak in the past and there is a need for a new emphasis on school-based professional development in line with international best practice.

Teachers described how they used a mix of traditional and more modern pedagogical methods

Teaching methods have been subject to extensive review during the past 20 years. During this time, the government, encouraged by international agencies, has consistently promoted the idea that traditional Vietnamese pedagogy is inadequate

Teachers in Vietnam are required by regulation to take personal responsibility for their professional development

²² OECD (2016b, 279) ²³ Circular No. 32/2011/TT-BGDĐT

HƯỚNG TÂM

Bài 14

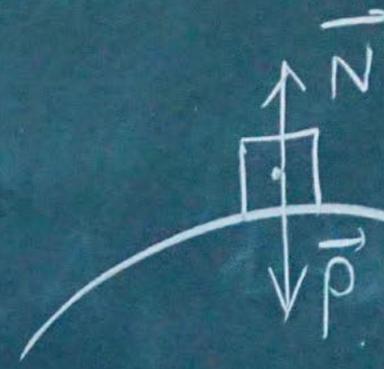
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trên đoạn

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P

for a modern school because students play too passive a role and need more opportunities to work collaboratively and apply knowledge to unfamiliar problems.

We heard different accounts from witnesses about classroom practice today. Some officials stated that students were now far more active as learners. Some experts disagreed and suggested that changes had been largely superficial. Many of the teachers and principals we interviewed suggested that the official push for new student-centred practices had in practice been negotiated and modified by teachers, who had created their own mixed-methods approach drawing on what they saw as the best of both traditional and modern methods. MOET has not explicitly approved this negotiation but tolerates it as long as the outcomes meet the required standard.

The evolution of a *de facto* mixed-method pedagogy was perhaps made possible because ultimately the authorities in Vietnam do not prescribe teaching methods. Various 'student-centred' practices have been promoted but in the end schools and teachers decide what teaching methods they adopt in the classroom. The Vietnamese system permits teachers to make most of the day-to-day decisions about teaching style.

There is some evidence from PISA to suggest that the experience of learning in a Vietnamese government school can be engaging and enjoyable. As part of the 2015 PISA survey, students from participating countries worldwide were asked whether they enjoyed learning science. The Vietnamese responses were strikingly enthusiastic: 89% of Vietnamese students agreed with the statement *I generally have fun when I am learning science topics* and 88% agreed that *I am happy working on science topics*.²⁴ This was the highest positive response rate from students in any country participating in PISA worldwide.

PISA data also suggests that another promising aspect of the Vietnamese system may be the way teachers use diagnostic feedback in the classroom. The PISA student survey in 2015 indicated that Vietnamese students were less likely than students from any other participating country in the world to agree that *The teacher never or almost never tells me how I can improve my performance*. Only 5.0% of Vietnamese students agreed with this statement – the lowest proportion of all countries participating in PISA.²⁵ This is particularly impressive because the average class size in a Vietnamese school is much higher than OECD norms, making individual-level feedback in the classroom more challenging.

The idea that emerged from our interviews with school staff of a mixed-method pedagogy also appears to be consistent with PISA data. The PISA 2015 student survey asked questions intended to ascertain whether teaching included 'teacher-directed' characteristics. The responses of the Vietnamese students made it clear they frequently experienced whole-class instruction and whole-class discussion as well as personalised guidance.²⁶ The PISA survey strengthens the case for the hypothesis that Vietnamese teachers combine 'student-centred' approaches with more traditional 'teacher-centred' techniques.

The Vietnamese system permits teachers to make most of the day-to-day decisions about teaching style

²⁴ OECD (2016a, 122) ²⁵ OECD (2016b, 290) ²⁶ OECD (2016b, 284)

School leadership that focuses on the classroom

Principals have a clearly defined role as leaders of teaching and learning

When we asked principals about their responsibilities they often replied that their duties were clearly described in school governance ‘charters’ published by MOET. These charters state that the principal is unambiguously the single person responsible for internal management and educational quality. The primary school charter defines the school principal as *the person responsible for organising and managing the school’s activities and quality of education*.

Significantly, the MOET school charters require principals to maintain their status as practising teachers, with a minimum commitment of two teaching periods a week. The principal is seen as a teacher and a leader of teachers. Our interviews with principals reinforced this point. While principals are responsible for many aspects of school life, they attributed particular significance to the monitoring of educational quality. Principals monitor teaching quality closely. We asked school principals in Hanoi and Ha Giang to tell us about a typical day in their professional life. There were many similarities between their accounts and the monitoring of teacher classroom performance featured prominently in all the narratives. Principals spend time both directly observing practice and receiving reports on observations that have been undertaken through the subject group peer review system. The partnership between the principal and the heads of the school subject groups is at the heart of the monitoring regime.

Monitoring teaching quality is an essential responsibility of the principal in a Vietnamese government school. The approach goes beyond checking for quality and compliance. Principals and teachers see the monitoring role as a developmental one, based on the diagnostic feedback that the principals provide.

The 2015 PISA survey of principals’ views supports the view that some Vietnamese principals have a focus on academic outcomes and teaching quality. Vietnamese principals were, for example, much more likely than principals on average in OECD countries to state that they regularly discussed the school’s academic goals with teachers at staff meetings.²⁷

Principals confidently described their views on the characteristics of high quality teaching

We asked school principals in Hanoi and Ha Giang what qualities they believed excellent school principals needed to possess. All talked of a combination of a strong moral or ethical standing and leadership skills. They also emphasised the importance of strong teaching and pedagogical skills. A key component of being an excellent school principal lies in understanding what is required to be an excellent teacher. Principals must be able to lead by example and need to understand what pedagogical excellence looks like.

The principals we interviewed spoke confidently about both ideal teaching styles and the characteristics of highly effective teachers.

Monitoring teaching quality is an essential responsibility of the principal in a Vietnamese government school

²⁷ OECD (2016b, 327–331)

We asked principals about the model of pedagogy that was promoted at their school. They often stressed the need for a repertory of teaching skills. We also asked principals how they might recognise an excellent teacher. Again, the responses were multi-faceted, and included moral/ethical traits, commitment to professional learning and technical pedagogical skills.

The Vietnamese model of school leadership is very different from some aspects of 'western' practice

Principals have substantial in-school power in Vietnamese schools but there are distinct limits to their autonomy and decision-making. Above all, they must report on a regular basis to higher authorities outside the school. In staff appointment and financial planning their powers are very limited.

The PISA 2015 survey of principals confirmed our view that the Vietnamese model of school leadership is quite different from 'western' models of highly decentralised school-based decision-making. Survey questions explored how far principals were permitted to make important decisions related to resources, such as on selecting teachers for hire; firing teachers for underperformance; establishing teachers' starting salaries; determining teachers' salary increases; and formulating the school budget. Vietnamese principals have much less authority in these areas than their peers in most OECD countries.²⁸

The actions of principals in Vietnam are subject to tight external control. There are two major forms of oversight – via the 'middle-tier' agencies, BOET or DOET, for technical educational matters and via the local agencies of the Communist Party on general matters. In addition, the Parent Board has, at least in theory, powers that circumscribe the work of the principal.

There are only minimal financial incentives for school principals. We asked principals in Ha Giang and Hanoi about their salaries. They described their monthly pay in late 2017 as ranging between 8 million and 11 million VND. This is no more than that of many experienced teachers. They told us they were paid less than some of their most experienced subordinates.

School principals are usually highly experienced teachers. Those we interviewed had between 10 and 35 years of teaching experience. Becoming a school principal is not a planned career move. Principals had not applied for their posts. Instead they had been approached by the authorities and invited to undertake the role. Regulations limit post-holders to a five-year period of tenure, although it is possible to be given a second five-year term. The principals we interviewed suggested they considered school leadership an honourable responsibility that they were surprised to be given.

The PISA 2015 survey of principals confirmed our view that the Vietnamese model of school leadership is quite different from 'western' models of highly decentralised school-based decision-making

Partnership between schools and parents

Parents expressed high levels of satisfaction with the government school system

We asked 350 parents from four different provinces what they thought of their children's schools. They were overall positive about the schools and the extent to which these were responsive to their concerns. They respected the skills

²⁸ See PISA 2015 'Index of Autonomy': OECD (2016b, 337)

and professionalism of the teacher workforce. Virtually no parents had serious concerns about the aptitude and attitudes of Vietnamese school teachers. A total of 92% considered the current teacher workforce to be 'good' or 'excellent' in terms of how far teachers cared about student progress and 90% rated government school teachers as 'good' or 'excellent' in terms of their professional ability.

The parents in our survey were overall happy with current teacher quality. They were also of the view that, in a range of important ways, schools have improved since they were children. The most marked agreement about improvement was on school facilities. There was also a strong majority view that improvements had been made, since parents' own time as school students, in terms of the curriculum, teacher attitudes and teacher experience.

Some Vietnamese government schools have good systems to foster parental partnership

We asked our sample of 350 parents from four provinces about the extent to which the local school listened and responded to them. The result was positive: 79% of parents stated that they felt listened to 'always' or 'most of the time'. Not a single parent agreed with the statement *I never feel listened to*.

These findings are in keeping with other evidence. According to reports by school principals in the PISA 2012 survey, Vietnamese parents had, in international comparative terms, an extremely high level of interaction with schools.²⁹ This engagement included both informal discussion about individual children and their progress and formal 'governance' arrangements for the management of the school.

The 2012 PISA data appears to suggest that *parent-initiated* conversations about either the behaviour or the academic progress of students are markedly more common in Vietnam compared with OECD country averages. Vietnamese parents appear to feel comfortable taking the lead in ensuring dialogue with teaching professionals about their children's behaviour and progress at school.

Vietnamese parents also appear, according to the 2012 PISA Survey, to be unusually visible as volunteers in school. Vietnamese principals reported that the percentage of parents who in the previous academic year had assisted a teacher in the school was 41%; this was the highest level of reported in-school volunteering of any country that participated in the 2012 PISA survey, and was far above the OECD average of 5%.³⁰

Parental partnership is mandated by the government of Vietnam as a formal school responsibility. MOET regulations require that teachers work closely with individual parents to ensure children do well. While teachers are obliged to work together with parents regarding the progress of individual students, schools are also required to consult parents collectively. Unusually in international terms, every single class in a government school should have a Parent Committee that reviews educational activities and the partnership between parents and teachers. The regulations state that there should be an influential whole school Parent Board, with parent members drawn from the class-level Parent Committee. Some of our expert witnesses suggested that, in reality, there was considerable variation in the way these Parent Boards functioned.

According to reports by school principals in the PISA 2012 survey, Vietnamese parents had, in international comparative terms, an extremely high level of interaction with schools

²⁹ OECD (2013) ³⁰ OECD (2013, 143)

Through the policy of ‘socialisation’ parents are expected to make additional contributions to their local school

For over 20 years the government of Vietnam has pursued a policy known as *xa hoi hoa*, or ‘socialisation’, in education and health, which involves an invitation to service users, local community members and community organisations to make financial or in-kind contributions to the cost of running services. At school level, parents, unless they are particularly disadvantaged, are expected make such contributions. This is both a means of securing additional resources and an expression of the view that service users and local communities, as well as the Vietnamese state, must shoulder the burden involved in ensuring good services.

Some experts have been critical of socialisation, seeing it either as a form of ‘privatisation’ or as an undesirable crisis measure that should not be necessary in more settled times when tax revenues are sufficient to fund services. Such critics highlight the risk that socialisation may provide opportunities for corruption or favour economically more privileged communities over disadvantaged communities, or the possibility that the children of parents who fail to contribute will be stigmatised.

Socialisation appears to be an important part of the current financial model for many schools in Vietnam. According to the PISA survey of principals in 2012, the percentage of Vietnamese parents who contributed to fundraising for their local school in the previous academic year was 61%. This was by far the highest figure of all countries participating in PISA 2012 and compared with an average for OECD countries of just 10%.³¹

Our school-based witnesses were largely positive about socialisation. Many principals described how additional facilities had made been made possible through socialisation. Perhaps conscious of some public criticism there has been of corruption, teachers and principals were keen to emphasise to us that socialisation was managed by the Parent Board, and depended entirely on their formal support and oversight. They were also eager to describe the careful scrutiny that parents applied to all decisions about socialisation and the way socialisation-funded projects were monitored by the Parent Board.

We asked our sample of 350 parents from four provinces in Vietnam about socialisation. A total of 81% of them stated that they made contributions to the school via the policy of socialisation (n=285/350). There was considerable variation in the amounts paid. A total of 11% of parents thought ‘socialisation’ payments were compulsory. In fact, by law, socialisation contributions are voluntary, but it seems this minority of parents had been given the impression by schools that the contributions were, in effect, obligatory.

Many of the parents in our small sample said they were content to make socialisation payments as a way of improving school facilities but it is not possible to generalise from this as our sample was not comprehensive of the diverse geography and the range of socio-economic and ethnic groups in Vietnam. While the survey of parental attitudes was broadly positive, there were also some dissenting thoughts. Some parents explicitly stated that they were concerned about favouritism; if, as a parent, you contribute via socialisation, might you expect a better deal, and perhaps better results, for your own children?

Many principals described how additional facilities had made been made possible through socialisation

³¹ OECD (2013, 143)

Chapter 3

Methodology



This research used a mixed-methods approach, drawing on both secondary data analysis and qualitative fieldwork, to investigate the following central research question: *What is and has been Vietnam's approach to educational improvement in government schools?*

The research was conducted over two years, building on data collected in Education Development Trust's *Interesting Cities* report, which included a chapter on school education in Ho Chi Minh City. It was conducted in partnership with the Vietnam Institute of Education Sciences (VNIES), which was a key collaborator during all stages of the research, from design to reporting. This research was predominantly concerned with Vietnamese stakeholder perceptions of Vietnam's education system, and the core findings are derived from a series of qualitative interviews, supported by a variety of secondary data sources.

This study seeks to identify some characteristics of the Vietnamese school system that may be of interest to international policymakers and others involved in the reform of government schools. We chose our title with care: we do not set out to provide an authoritative study of proven 'good practice' but make more modest claims. The characteristics we describe seem to us to be 'promising practice'. We tell a largely positive story but also a complex one, which is not without problems. We make no definitive claims about causal factors that have determined the apparent effectiveness of many government schools in Vietnam.

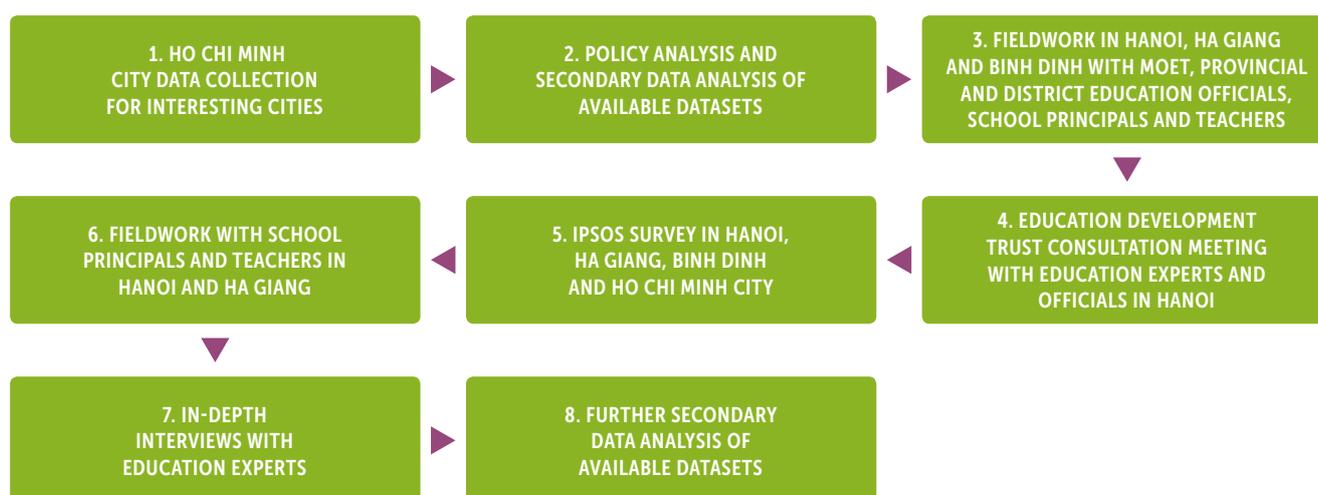
Vietnam is a large and complex country, and our limited fieldwork took place in only four out of 63 provinces and metropolitan municipalities. Our evidence relies heavily on the perceptions of the stakeholders we interviewed, and this methodology has both strengths and limitations. Our interviews with teachers, principals and officials provided rich and interesting data. However, it is important to note that our methodology did not provide an opportunity for us to verify the claims that interviewees had made. While we were impressed by the apparent frankness of our interviewees, it is clearly possible that the principals and teachers and local officials we interviewed may sometimes have over-stated the positive features of current provision and of their own work. Vietnam is a large and diverse country; it is also feasible that aspects of school provision in our four target provinces are not representative of the whole country.

This study seeks to identify some characteristics of the Vietnamese school system that may be of interest to international policymakers and others involved in the reform of government schools

The research involved the following phases of data collection:

- A policy review of Vietnamese educational policies since 2000 was conducted by VNIES.
- A review took place of transcripts of interviews undertaken previously with stakeholders in Ho Chi Minh City conducted for the *Interesting Cities* research.
- Interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted in three provinces in Vietnam (Hanoi, Binh Dinh and Ha Giang), with the following groups in each province:
 - FGDs with teachers at each level of schooling (primary, lower secondary and upper secondary), with groups varying in size between 6 and 20 teachers and discussions lasting approximately 60 minutes
 - interviews with school principals and vice principals at each level of schooling (primary, lower secondary and upper secondary)
 - interviews with DOET and BOET officials in each province
 - FGDs with pedagogical college lecturers in Hanoi and Ha Giang (there is no pedagogical college in Binh Dinh province)
- Interviews were held with a senior MOET official at national level.
- A consultation meeting with education officials and education experts in Hanoi discussed preliminary findings. This further shaped the requirements for the following phase of data collection.
- Education Development Trust commissioned Ipsos Vietnam to conduct a survey with parents (350), pedagogical colleges (40) and local businesses (50) across Ho Chi Minh City, Hanoi, Binh Dinh and Ha Giang (see Tables 7 to 9).
- A second phase of interviews and FGDs was held with school principals and teachers in Hanoi and Ha Giang to provide further in-depth insight into existing responses. All participants also completed surveys, in addition to producing written narratives of what they considered an excellent teacher to be, a typical day for school principals and an excellent lesson. Participants were as follows:
 - six school principal interviews per province
 - one FGD of teachers per level of schooling in each province
- Six interviews were held with education experts in Vietnam, with specific expertise in the following areas:
 - K-12 general education
 - ethnic minority groups
 - pre-primary education
 - informal education
- Further secondary data analysis took place of available datasets. These included the Vietnam Household Living Standards Surveys, Young Lives data, Grade 5 Assessment data, PISA 2012 and 2015 results and statistics available on the General Statistics Office of Vietnam (GSO) website. We made particularly extensive use of the student and principal surveys conducted in Vietnam in 2012 and 2015 as part of the PISA process.

FIGURE 3: HIGH-LEVEL OVERVIEW OF DATA COLLECTION



Interviews and focus group discussions

Qualitative aspects of data collection adopted a semi-structured approach.

The first phase of fieldwork was exploratory, and sought to identify core themes through open-ended dialogue with participants.

The second phase of qualitative fieldwork involved exploring core themes identified in the first phase in more depth, including policies and issues that had previously not been identified as significant in our analysis. Further policy analysis was conducted prior to these interviews and after they had taken place.

Annex A provides a full list of participants and sampling.

Ipsos survey

We commissioned Ipsos Vietnam to conduct a survey of parents and other stakeholders across the four provinces in Vietnam where we had conducted interviews with school staff and local government staff: Hanoi, Ha Giang, Binh Dinh and Ho Chi Minh City. Table 7 presents the sample for the survey.

TABLE 7: SAMPLE OF PARENTS' SURVEY

| Province | Count | % |
|------------------|------------|-------------|
| Ho Chi Minh City | 100 | 29% |
| Hanoi | 100 | 29% |
| Ha Giang | 75 | 21% |
| Binh Dinh | 75 | 21% |
| Total | 350 | 100% |

Considerable care is needed in the interpretation of the results from this small survey of parents. The parents overall were more economically advantaged and better educated than the population overall, and there were fewer parents from ethnic minorities compared with the population as a whole.

TABLE 8: SAMPLE OF LOCAL BUSINESSES

| Province | Count |
|------------------|-----------|
| Ho Chi Minh City | 15 |
| Hanoi | 15 |
| Ha Giang | 10 |
| Binh Dinh | 10 |
| Total | 50 |

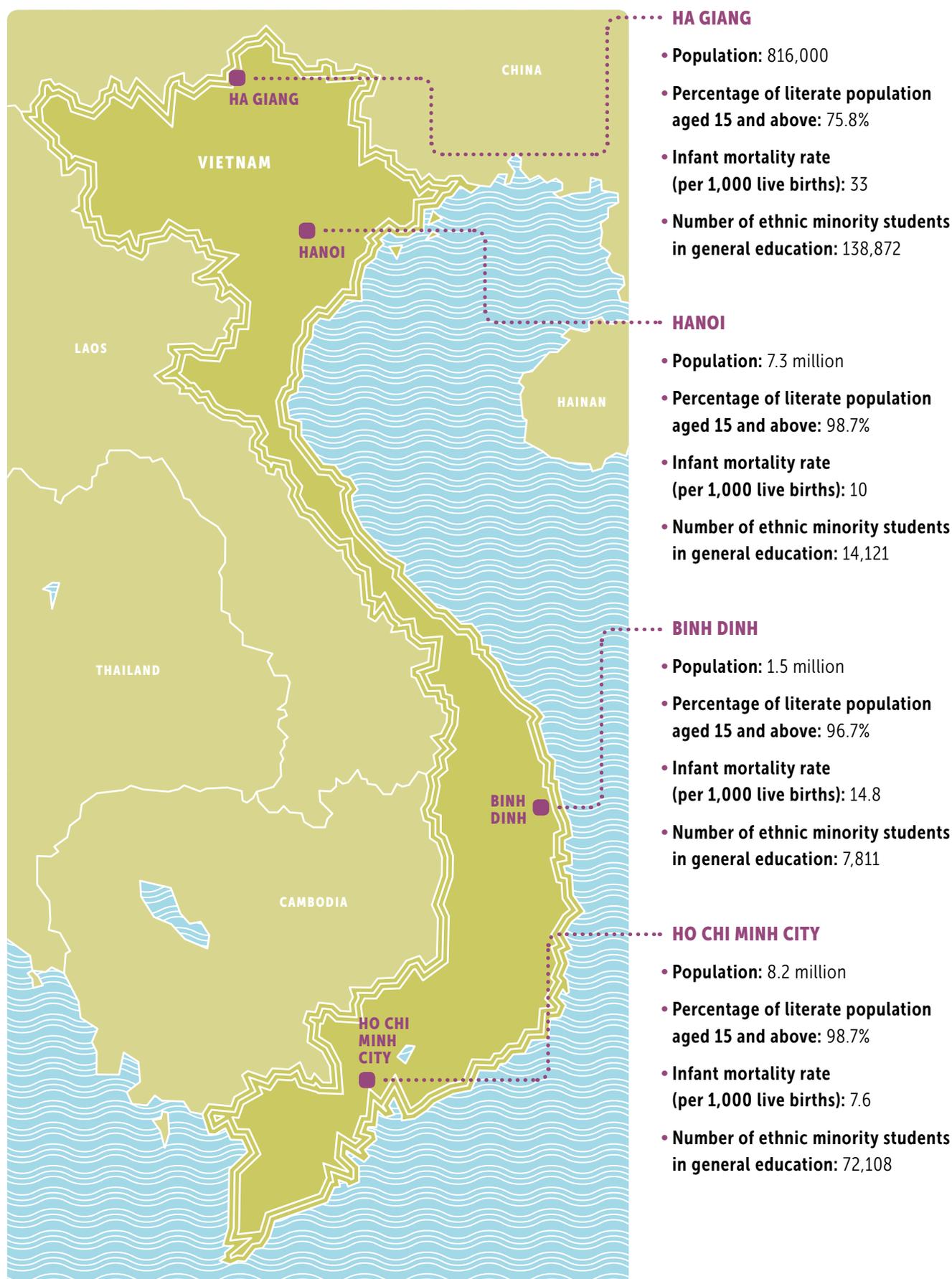
TABLE 9: SAMPLE OF PEDAGOGICAL COLLEGES

| Province | Count |
|------------------|-----------|
| Ho Chi Minh City | 15 |
| Hanoi | 15 |
| Ha Giang | 5 |
| Binh Dinh | 5 |
| Total | 40 |

Language

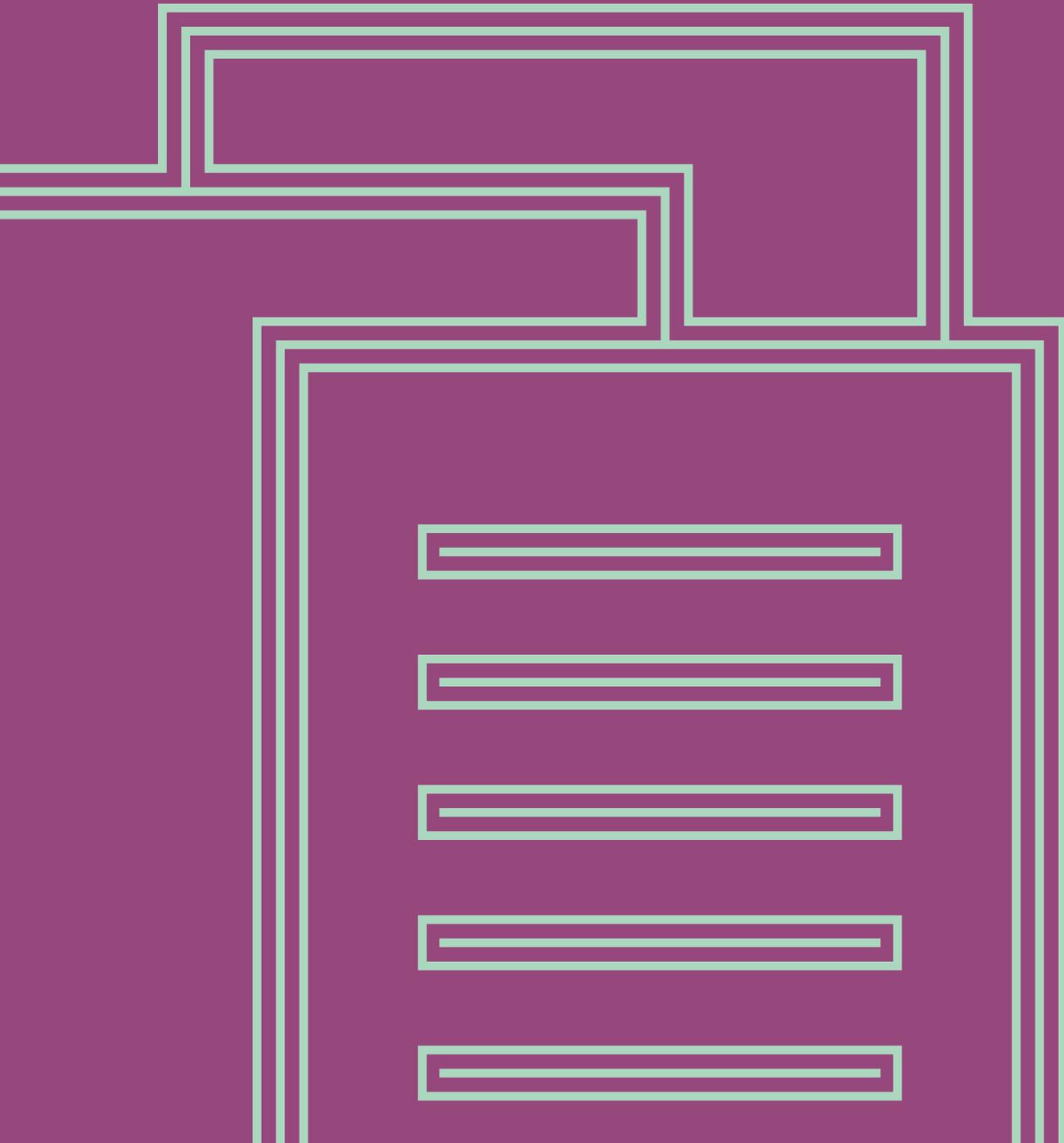
The surveys, interviews and focus groups were conducted in Vietnamese, with transcripts and responses translated into English for analysis by the research team. Interviews or focus groups co-facilitated by VNIES and Education Development Trust took place with an interpreter providing simultaneous translation from Vietnamese to English and vice versa.

Policies and other key documents were translated from Vietnamese to English and analysed both in Vietnamese and English.

FIGURE 4: MAP OF VIETNAM AND PROVINCES WHERE DATA WAS COLLECTED ³²³² GSO (2016)

Chapter 4

Purposeful policymaking



For many decades the government of Vietnam has consistently stated that education is a policy priority, and government statistics state that there has been substantial investment in the expansion and improvement of the school system.

Government spending has been driven by a clear plan and the government has consistently promoted the same priorities over many years. Our research highlighted four distinctive features of policymaking and policy implementation in Vietnam:

1. Education has received particularly high levels of investment from the government for many years.
2. Government investment in education has been spent in line with a consistent theory of educational change.
3. Vietnam has an apparently efficient 'delivery system' for policy implementation based on the combination of top-down direction and bottom-up feedback.
4. There is evidence of a lively professional and public discourse on education policy and school quality.

This chapter draws on data collected during our qualitative fieldwork, in addition to statistics published by MOET and data from Young Lives Vietnam, the RISE programme³³ and PISA 2012 and 2015.

The government of Vietnam has consistently identified education as a major national priority

1. Government investment

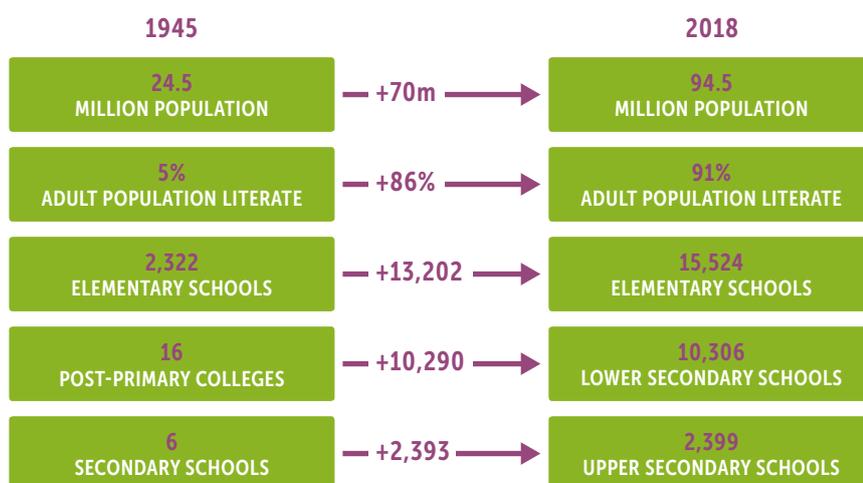
The government of Vietnam has consistently identified education as a major national priority. In 1945 President Ho Chi Minh famously said that, 'An illiterate nation is a powerless one.'³⁴ To fight against illiteracy, three decrees were issued. The first stated that, 'Everyone in the country has to be literate.' The second called for the establishment of literacy classes for farmers and workers to attend at night. The third stated that, 'While waiting for the establishment of compulsory primary education, teaching the national language will be compulsory from now on and free for everyone.'³⁵ The challenge was significant, given the estimated illiteracy rate of 95% in 1945. Within less than one year of President Ho Chi Minh calling for literacy education for all, 75,000 literacy classes, with approximately 96,000

³³ RISE stands for 'Research on Improving Systems of Education'. The programme seeks to understand what features make an education system coherent and effective in their context, and how the complex dynamics within a system allow policies to be successful. Vietnam is one of the countries under investigation by the RISE team. For more information about the programme, visit their website: www.riseprogramme.org/ ³⁴ In Nguyen and Nguyen (2008, 111) ³⁵ In Nguyen and Nguyen (2008, 111)

teachers, were created, reaching approximately 2.5 million people. These early achievements took place against the backdrop of a war of liberation against the French colonial power.³⁶

Figure 5 demonstrates the gains that have been seen in the development of the education system since 1945. These achievements are particularly impressive since the country was riven by war from 1945 until 1975. The devastation of war is powerfully illustrated by the fact that, during the period of US air strikes, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, a total of 1,588 schools and education institutions were destroyed.³⁷

FIGURE 5: VIETNAM EDUCATION STATISTICS, 1945–2018 ³⁸



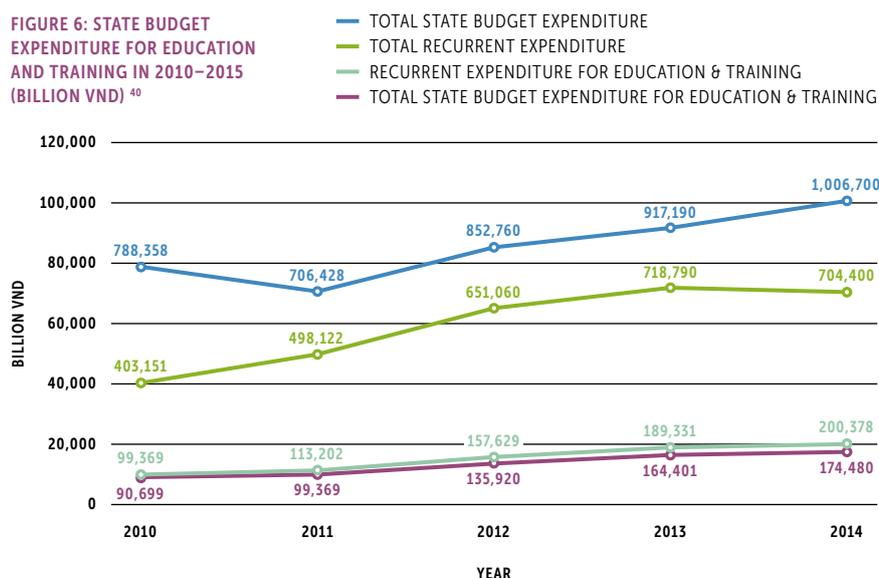
The government of Vietnam has identified education as not just a priority but the top national priority. According to MOET, education spending has accounted for at least 20% of all public spending in recent years, with this public investment supplemented as a result of the 'socialisation' policy that encourages contributions in cash and in kind by others, including parents and businesses. Government statistics show that expenditure on education as a percentage of GDP rose from 3.57% in 2000 to 5.18% in 2006.³⁹ The remarkable economic growth achieved by Vietnam since the 1990s has greatly increased tax revenues and thereby increased, in absolute terms, the value of the commitment to '20% of all public spending'.

Between 2010 and 2014 the rate of increase in education spending was greater than the overall rate of increase in government spending so that, while education spending constituted 19.4% of all recurrent expenditure in 2010, by 2014 it had taken up 25% of all recurrent expenditure.

Government statistics show that expenditure on education as a percentage of GDP rose from 3.57% in 2000 to 5.18% in 2006

³⁶ Nguyen and Nguyen (2008, 111) ³⁷ Nguyen and Nguyen (2008, 111) ³⁸ Data for 1945 from Nguyen and Nguyen (2007); data for 2018 from GSO online statistics portal: www.gso.gov.vn/default_en.aspx?tabid=782 ³⁹ MOET (2015, 31)

FIGURE 6: STATE BUDGET EXPENDITURE FOR EDUCATION AND TRAINING IN 2010–2015 (BILLION VND) ⁴⁰

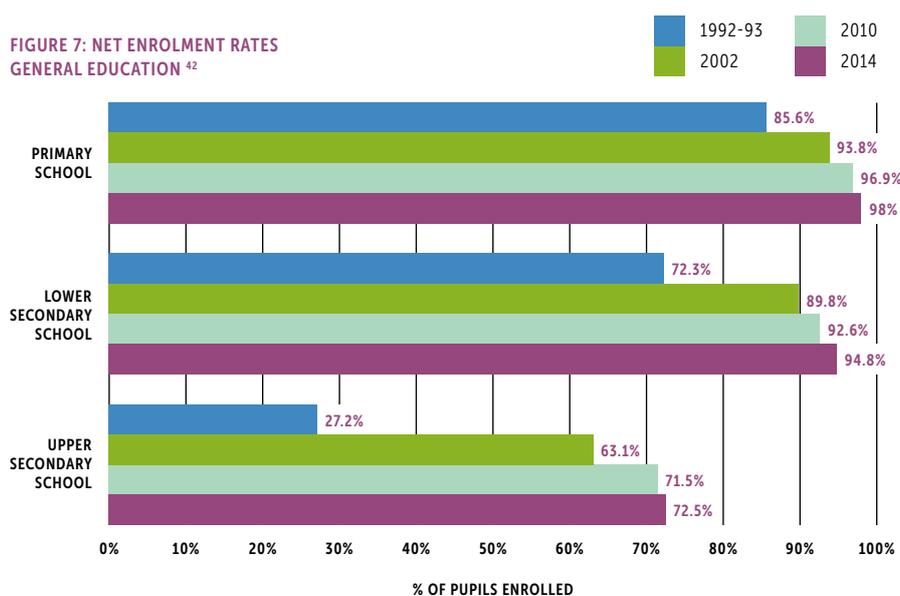


The investment in education has made possible rapid progress in the improvement of student enrolment at all levels of the education system.

TABLE 10: GROSS ENROLMENT RATES PRE-PRIMARY EDUCATION ⁴¹

| | 2007 | 2008 | 2009 | 2010 | 2011 | 2012 | 2013 | 2014 | 2015 | 2016 |
|---------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| Male | 73.61 | 67.54 | 69.83 | 72.05 | 76.71 | 80.19 | 84.72 | 82.71 | 84.12 | 88.4 |
| Female | 61.11 | 67.98 | 67.8 | 69.36 | 71.03 | 76.16 | 78.49 | 79.86 | 82.03 | 84.93 |
| Total | 67.54 | 67.76 | 68.85 | 70.75 | 73.97 | 78.26 | 81.75 | 81.35 | 83.13 | 86.75 |

FIGURE 7: NET ENROLMENT RATES GENERAL EDUCATION ⁴²



⁴⁰ Data from GSO in 'Ensuring 20% of total state budget expenditure for education and training' on <http://thoibaotaichinhvietnam.vn/> ⁴¹ UIS (2018) ⁴² Dang and Glewwe (2017, 41)

Most primary-age students are now enrolled. Participation at other levels has also improved. The rate of improvement in lower secondary school enrolment has been particularly marked. The greatest remaining challenges are to ensure all students can attend school for a full day and to provide universal access to upper secondary school. By 2014 still almost 30% of the age cohort was not enrolled in the upper secondary phase.

In recent years national education policy has been geared towards improving school coverage and school conditions in poor and remote areas, particularly in areas populated by large numbers of people from ethnic minorities. The Vietnamese government and the major donors agreed that developing education in these areas and for these people was a priority.

Government spending favours ethnic minority students in some ways. Teachers are paid substantial additional allowances if they agree to work in remote or disadvantaged communities. More expensive semi-boarding schools – state schools with boarding facilities – are now common in remote areas. The government also provides allowances directly to disadvantaged students. This includes free meals, rice allowances, boarding and tuition fee waivers and other exemptions. The government has prepared textbooks in several minority languages and encouraged the use of local community languages within kindergartens before pupils shift to Vietnamese at primary school.

The greatest remaining challenges are to ensure all students can attend school for a full day and to provide universal access to upper secondary school

2. The government theory of educational change

Not only has the government of Vietnam invested substantial sums in education but also the money has been used as part of a carefully considered approach to educational improvement, addressing both access issues and quality issues. The approach has been both multi-faceted and consistently sustained over time. In addition to building many more schools and refurbishing existing schools, the government has sought to improve the quality of the teaching workforce and the classroom methods used by teachers. The government has also tried to empower parents so that they can apply local-level pressure for quality.

Much of the increased spending has been used to upgrade school buildings and build new schools. This public expenditure – and resources from other sources – has led to a transformation in the quality of school infrastructure and equipment. Changes to infrastructure are, of course, an obviously visible manifestation of change. Our witnesses repeatedly commented on the improvement in infrastructure and sometimes cited this as a reason for improvements in teaching and learning in the Vietnamese system.

Comments about the improvements in infrastructure were particularly evident among our witnesses from Ha Giang province, where many teachers and school principals stated they had previously taught in informal structures made of bamboo.⁴³

Now I no longer see classrooms built from bamboo as was the case many years ago, I go to other places and see changes as well (Ha Giang primary school teacher).

The facilities and equipment in our school have been upgraded greatly (Ha Giang secondary school teacher).

⁴³ All interview and focus group participants in Ha Giang province commented on improvements in infrastructure in the past 15 years. This was also raised by participants in Binh Dinh from the pedagogical college and DOET and by secondary school principals

[School name] is in a mountainous region with fewer than 150 students, but students are ethnic minorities, who mostly learn Vietnamese [as a second language], yet the school receives very big investments which include multipurpose facilities (Binh Dinh secondary school teacher).

In the past 10 years we have received a lot of care and attention from the government. Ha Giang is among the poorest provinces in Vietnam, so we are the target for many projects and programmes (Ha Giang DOET official).

Prior to 2006, the overall condition was poor, there was limited budget; facilities were poor; there were barely enough chairs to sit on; much of teaching equipment was not usable, we could only select a few most suitable (Ha Giang BOET official).

In the past the teacher used black board and chalks and technology was not developed. Nowadays all classrooms have projectors and smart devices (Binh Dinh DOET official).

International education researchers have often pointed out that there is little strong evidence to support any assumption that investment in infrastructure alone will lead to better student outcomes. However, this position is based on a view of improved infrastructure as a standalone reform. This was not what happened in Vietnam, where improved facilities were combined with attempts to improve simultaneously some of the other key factors determining school quality, such as the school readiness of five year olds and the quality of teaching. Since 2000 priorities, in addition to improved infrastructure, have included: ⁴⁴

- narrowing the gap between opportunities and outcomes in different geographical areas in Vietnam and between the Kinh majority and Vietnamese people from ethnic minority groups
- investing in public kindergartens so almost all children have spent a year in kindergarten before beginning primary school
- encouraging teachers to use more engaging student-centred pedagogical techniques in the classroom
- improving the pre-service training requirements for teachers at all levels of the pre-school and school system

In 2015 the government of Vietnam submitted a progress report to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) reviewing progress towards the Millennium Development Goals' Education For All (EFA) National Review Report 2015. This tells us an impressive story in terms of increased enrolment. It also set out, in effect, the 'theory' that had driven the reform agenda in Vietnam in the previous decades.

The content and scope of the education reform focused on the following: adjust the ideas and solutions that were no longer suitable; boldly propose and implement solutions to stem the recession; stabilize the formation and consolidation of the system; create power and strength to continue developing in the direction of socialisation, democratisation, diversification, modernisation, mobilisation of all social sectors, families and schools in caring for the younger generation; make efforts to maintain, strengthen and further develop national

International education researchers have often pointed out that there is little strong evidence to support any assumption that investment in infrastructure alone will lead to better student outcomes. However, this position is based on a view of improved infrastructure as a standalone reform. This was not what happened in Vietnam...

⁴⁴ These areas of improvement were identified through the overarching analysis of our qualitative fieldwork data in HCMC, Hanoi, Ha Giang and Binh Dinh

*education; care for the physical life and spirit of teachers and educational managers; and consider teachers and management staff to be the leading decisive factors in ensuring high quality and effective education.*⁴⁵

Significantly, this statement of policy priorities did not even mention building new schools. Infrastructure improvements, by implication, were an important precondition to transformation but not by themselves transformative. Improvement also required the harnessing of the energies of all key stakeholders, particularly parents – that is, the ‘mobilisation of all social sectors’. Teachers and educational leaders, not infrastructural improvements, were identified as ‘the leading decisive factors in ensuring high quality and effective education’.

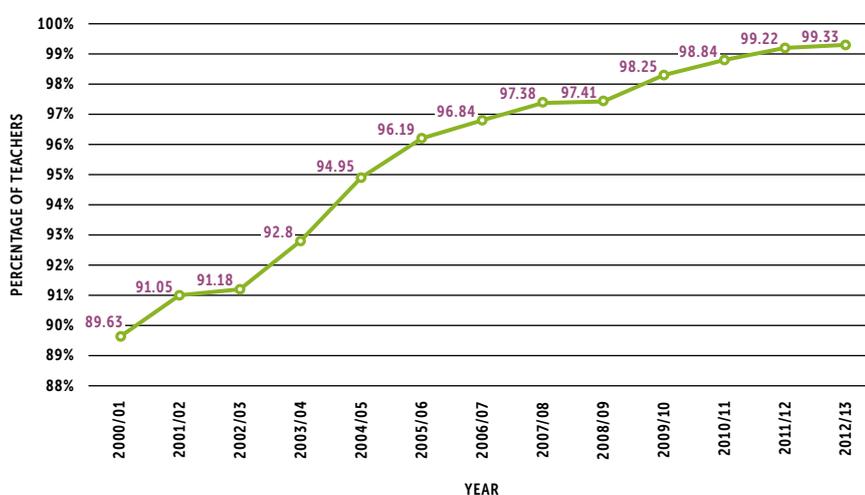
When commenting on recent changes to the Vietnamese government school system our school-based witnesses frequently mentioned infrastructure, but just as frequently they told us about the improved ‘standardisation’ of the teaching workforce. By this they meant the achievement of standards or targets relating to the level of pre-service training received by school teachers. Table 11 summarises the current basic qualification standards for teachers, which are calibrated so that the older the school student the higher the expected pre-service qualification level.

Teachers and educational leaders, not infrastructural improvements, were identified as ‘the leading decisive factors in ensuring high quality and effective education’

TABLE 11: TEACHING STANDARDS BASED ON EDUCATION LEVEL ⁴⁶

| Pre-primary teachers | Primary teachers | Lower secondary teachers | Upper secondary teachers |
|--|--|--|--|
| As a minimum, a post-secondary non-tertiary (two years in pre-service training) Degree in Teacher Training specialising in pre-primary education | As a minimum, a post-secondary non-tertiary (two years in pre-service training) Degree in Teacher Training specialising in primary education OR a post-secondary non-tertiary Degree in specialisations in line with subjects taught | As a minimum, a college Degree (four years in pre-service training) in Teacher Training OR a college Degree in specialisations in line with subjects taught AND a Pedagogical Certificate for Lower Secondary Teachers | As a minimum, a university Degree (four years in pre-service training) in Teacher Training OR a university Degree in specialisations in line with subjects taught AND a Pedagogical Certificate for Upper Secondary Teachers |

FIGURE 8: LOWER SECONDARY TEACHERS REACHING NATIONAL STANDARDS, 2000–2013 ⁴⁷



⁴⁵ MOET (2015, 7) ⁴⁶ Article 2, Section 77, Education Law No. 38/2005/QH11, 14 June 2005 ⁴⁷ MOET website, retrieved December 2016

The theory of change underpinning policy has been based deliberately on the study of international practice. Vietnamese policymakers are driven by an economic imperative: how to ensure the competitiveness of the Vietnamese workforce? In response to this challenge, Vietnam has adopted an outward-looking approach to policy, looking to lessons from economically successful countries when developing policies and then adapting them to the Vietnamese context.

We operate in the context of globalisation, so there was a need to compare with other countries in the area and learn from what they are doing well to apply into our current conditions (Binh Dinh DOET official).

The decision, for example, to encourage more interactive pedagogical practice was based on the analysis of teaching practice in other countries. Similarly, teaching standards were developed taking into consideration the international literature relating to the characteristics of high-quality teaching. The standards were developed comparing systems of teacher evaluation from the UK, Australia and the USA as a source for ideas in developing standards, while also ensuring Vietnamese specific metrics were included.^{48, 49}

3. The 'delivery system' for policy implementation

When describing the process of policy implementation in Vietnam, school principals frequently referred to this as the 'logical system'. The 'logical system' is simultaneously top down and bottom up. Mandated policies are cascaded down from the national government to schools via the provincial or district education office. At the same time there is a feedback loop so that frontline views of implementation problems are rapidly reported up the system.

In the logical system of education, information is two-way, bottom up and top down, very tightly connected. Officials at higher levels are aware of things happening at lower levels, and those at the lower level report well (Binh Dinh primary school principal).

I think our system is logical... each unit has its own responsibility and function within the system so I don't see which is strong or weak. I think balance and collaboration is important, from the MOET to DOET/BOET, down to the individual schools (Binh Dinh secondary school vice principal).

Local officials described how national policies were considered before engaging with schools.

The directives are received and transferred to the person in charge to read and give advice. There is discussion about any concerns or questions, before implementing at school level (Binh Dinh BOET official).

Important aspects of the 'logical system' include clarity about the roles of the different actors in the system. Critically, the responsibilities of the school principals are very precisely itemised in official school charters issued by MOET. Our school-based witnesses suggested that implementation was subject to strict monitoring and was part of a wider, high-accountability, professional culture. School principals in particular described how they were required to keep meticulous records of how their schools were implementing policies.

When describing the process of policy implementation in Vietnam, school principals frequently referred to this as the 'logical system'

⁴⁸ Griffin et al. (2006) ⁴⁹ Interviews with two Vietnamese education experts who were involved in the development and implementation of teacher standards in 2007 explained the approach adopted to develop the standards, emphasising the importance of looking outward to international policies when developing policies for the Vietnamese context

The pivotal person in the 'logical system' appears to be the school principal, who acts as the interface between the school community and the external state authorities. The role of the principal is very different to the more autonomous concept of the school leader found in 'western' contexts. The school principal in Vietnam is powerful in many ways but does not have authority in areas such as the hiring of new staff and the use of the school budget for different priorities. They are expected to be highly accountable. This requires them to have a comprehensive view of all activity within their school. Principals work closely with either DOET or BOET to ensure policies are implemented 'correctly' and have regular meetings at local level to discuss new policies and provide feedback on the implementation of existing policy.

We implement the policies. Then we write a report about the process
(Binh Dinh secondary school vice principal).

Principals and expert witnesses both described how policy was adapted over time in response to different forms of feedback from the frontline. School principals indicated that they gave feedback to supervisors from the district or provincial office on the effectiveness of policies and that their suggestions were often acted upon, though not always swiftly.

VNIES experts described how their organisation provided another form of feedback to MOET. They monitor policies in practice and suggested that, if they saw widespread evidence that a policy was problematic in practice, they would go to MOET and present their findings. The head of the VNIES Department for Ethnic Minority Groups, for example, described how the Institute monitored policy in practice relating to the experience of ethnic minority children and provided recommendations to the central ministry on ways of improving policy implementation.

We were struck by the extent to which our witnesses, particularly teachers and school principals, frankly identified the many problems they faced

4. The professional and public discourse

Although the government school system in Vietnam is in many ways hierarchical, it is also characterised by a particularly lively professional and public discourse about school education within which people speak openly about some educational problems.

We were struck by the extent to which our witnesses, particularly teachers and school principals, frankly identified the many problems they faced. This seemed to hint at a healthy professional culture within which people were fundamentally compliant but were also not afraid to identify to their superiors the practical difficulties they faced in policy implementation.

During the period when we were interviewing stakeholders for this research there was much discussion about, for example, changes to the assessment requirements. This provided an example of how policy changes are mediated, discussed and implemented. In Circular 30 of 2014, MOET⁵⁰ set out quite precisely new government expectations about more qualitative student assessment. The rationale was the need to provide more diagnostic guidance to students and to move away from an unhelpful preoccupation with grades.

⁵⁰ Circular No. 30/2014/TT-BGDĐT

Teachers indicated to us that they took the instructions in Circular 30 very seriously and intended to comply but the changes had generated a very lively and frank debate about the desirability and practicality of the changes. Our witnesses spoke frankly with us about their different views of the changes.⁵¹

There's great pressure to apply these new instructions... I think that if we have to speak individually to each student – my class has 40–50 students – it will take a lot of time. And the time pressure is already great (Binh Dinh primary school teacher).

The parents keep complaining that they do not know what progress their children are making (Ha Giang primary school teacher).

Currently for elementary grades we have eliminated the approach of marking by numerical grades and replaced this by giving comments only. This approach at first seems to be reasonable because it reduces pressure on students. However, several challenging issues emerged during the implementation of such a method. Teachers failed to fill in adequate comments for every student because the number of student in just one class is enormous... Furthermore, parents seem to lack time to read comments given by teachers because it may be too much for them to understand... If assessment were in the form of a combination of both marks and comments then our students would be much more adequately evaluated (Hanoi primary school teacher).

With Circular 30 assessment is only qualitative – no grades. This method has some strengths but also some weaknesses. The majority of students want to have grades that they can show to their parents, and the parents find it easier to understand about learning progress through numerical grades. But other students whose scores are lower, maybe five or under five, they like this method because they may not get scolded by their parents. However, Decree 30 and Decree 22 with amendments are more suitable for primary school students; they help reduce the pressure. The students will also see what they have done well or not so well and how to improve their results (Ha Giang primary school teachers).

The effectiveness of this approach has already been recognised internationally. And in the educational practice in our country I believe that learning results of students will improve remarkably if this approach is implemented well. But it requires effort both from students and teachers (Hanoi secondary school teacher).

In addition to a lively professional culture of debate, there is also a public discourse about education and extensive coverage of education topics in the media.

Education scandals – such as examples of principals who have 'over-collected' fees or socialisation contributions – are also given media prominence.

One recent example of a public debate has been the extensive media coverage of parental worries about the teaching methods used as part of the Viet Nam Escuela Nueva (VNEN) project. Evaluation data from the World Bank regarding the impact of this project on learning outcomes has been positive.⁵² However, expert witnesses told us of some provinces and districts where parents had so vehemently opposed VNEN that authorities had had to respond by adapting the initiative or abandoning

In addition to a lively professional culture of debate, there is also a public discourse about education and extensive coverage of education topics in the media

⁵¹ Circular No. 30/2014/TT-BGDĐT was raised in 10 FGDs with teachers across Binh Dinh, Ha Giang and Hanoi. The discussion in these groups regarding Circular 30 often involved debate on the success of the policy, with some challenges and some support for the policy. In all instances discussion of Circular 30 was raised without prompting by the interviewer

⁵² Parandekar et al (2017)

it altogether. Parents, it seems, often had a conservative view of desirable teaching and learning styles and were sceptical about VNEN. The Vietnamese media has widely reported some parental dissatisfaction with the VNEN model. There was, for example, national media coverage in 2016 of parental opposition to VNEN in Nghe An province.⁵³ At one school, Nguyen Trai Elementary School in Vinh City, hundreds of parents demonstrated publicly against implementation of the VNEN model, which they believed was counter-productive in terms of student learning.⁵⁴ In another school, Hung Dung Secondary School in the same province, 92% of parents who completed a questionnaire in 2017 stated they were dissatisfied with VNEN and wanted it to be discontinued. As a result of this parental expression of discontent, the school made the decision to abandon the model from school year 2017/18. Media reports of this story presented a narrative of determined parents who had 'a voice':

Ms Le Thi Xuan, a parent with a child in Grade 8, said, 'The programme is not appropriate. The progress of children is not satisfactory. We have protested against it from the beginning, but it has taken two years to be resolved. Anyway, now we can breathe a sigh of relief.' Nguyen Van Trung, Head of the Parent Board, said, 'We had already bought the VNEN textbooks for our children. So we are losing money, but at least we have peace of mind about the children's education.'⁵⁵

The interesting aspect of this story is not so much what it tells us about the strengths or weaknesses of VNEN. As we have seen, the World Bank impact assessment was positive in terms of learning outcomes. The debate about VNEN does, however, provide evidence of the possibility of a strong parental 'voice' at a local level. Of course, this is largely anecdotal evidence and not necessarily representative. Our expert witnesses were keen to tell us that the power dynamic between parents and school professionals varied from place to place.

Another example of a topic that has provoked a lively public and professional debate relates to the so-called 'achievement disease' or the 'achievement obsession'. This is the view, promoted by government, that widespread preoccupation with the achievement of good grades can lead to undesirable consequences. The unintended results of 'achievement disease' potentially include such things as reluctance on the part of teachers to tell parents that the performance of children is less than excellent for fear of causing offence. At its worst, 'achievement disease' may lead to different forms of gaming or cheating. One of the teachers we interviewed in Binh Dinh described to us how parents had been influenced by media coverage of 'achievement disease':

If the exams are too easy and students have good grades, they say it's fake, not reliable... I think it's because of the news and media talking negatively about education (Binh Dinh secondary school teacher).

The 'achievement disease' discourse has been very influential both with the public and with professionals. One teacher trainer from Binh Dinh talked about the tendency of many teachers to feel they have to give good grades to almost all students, regardless of performance, in order not to disappoint parents:

Our expert witnesses were keen to tell us that the power dynamic between parents and school professionals varied from place to place

⁵³ See Tuoi Tre News (2016), Lao Dong (2017), Bao Moi (2017) 24hr.net.vn (2017) and Viet Nam.net (2017) ⁵⁴Tuoi Tre News (2016) ⁵⁵Lao Dong (2017)

We focus too much on achievement; the number of students that achieve a good standard sometimes is 44 out of 45 in one class (Binh Dinh pedagogical college trainer).

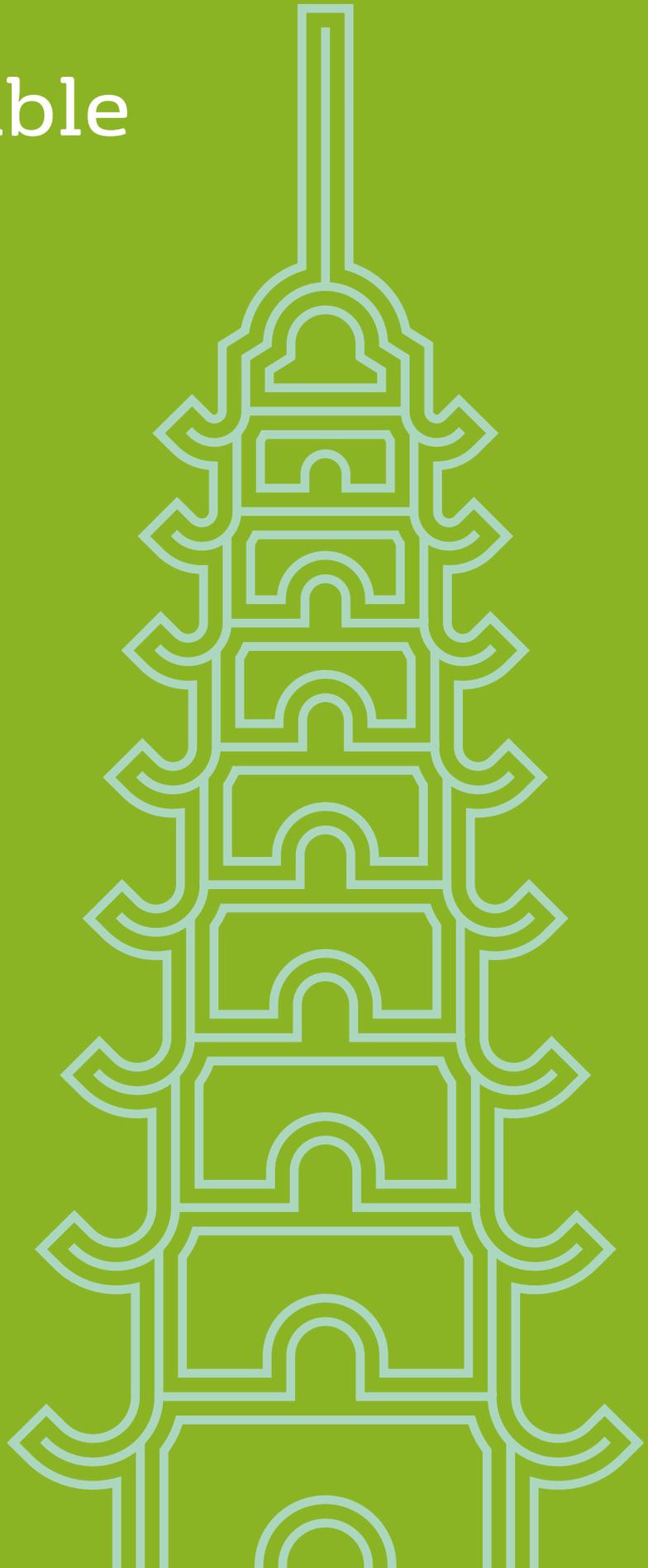
Some commented that, when changes were made in the system to tackle 'achievement disease', they were often superficial and did not tackle the root cause. One principal from Hanoi, making explicit reference to the idea of 'achievement obsession', told us how he was interested in deep change and not superficial 'achievements' such as commendations in local competitions for excellent teachers.

The Department told us that we have too few 'achievements' and commented that we don't take part in the Municipal Excellent Teacher Competition... To answer that, we don't want to waste time and money on that sort of 'achievement' because, for us, it is just superficial. We would rather spend the time teaching our students well. We are also under pressure and need to stand firm in the face of the achievement obsession (Hanoi secondary school principal).

When changes were made in the system to tackle 'achievement disease', they were often superficial and did not tackle the root cause

Chapter 5

A highly accountable system



Vietnamese school teachers are systematically held to account for the quality of their work and, in international comparative terms, seem to be subject to an unusually high level of internal and external monitoring and scrutiny.

Teachers are not the only people who are held to account; all education system stakeholders – including parents – are, according to the regulations, explicitly accountable for the part they play in ensuring the effective functioning of schools.

A broad view of accountability is used here, including a range of formal and informal accountability mechanisms. Accountability is provided not just through formal internal arrangements such as school governance and formal external scrutiny through school inspections. It is provided also through informal dialogue, relationships and cultural norms.

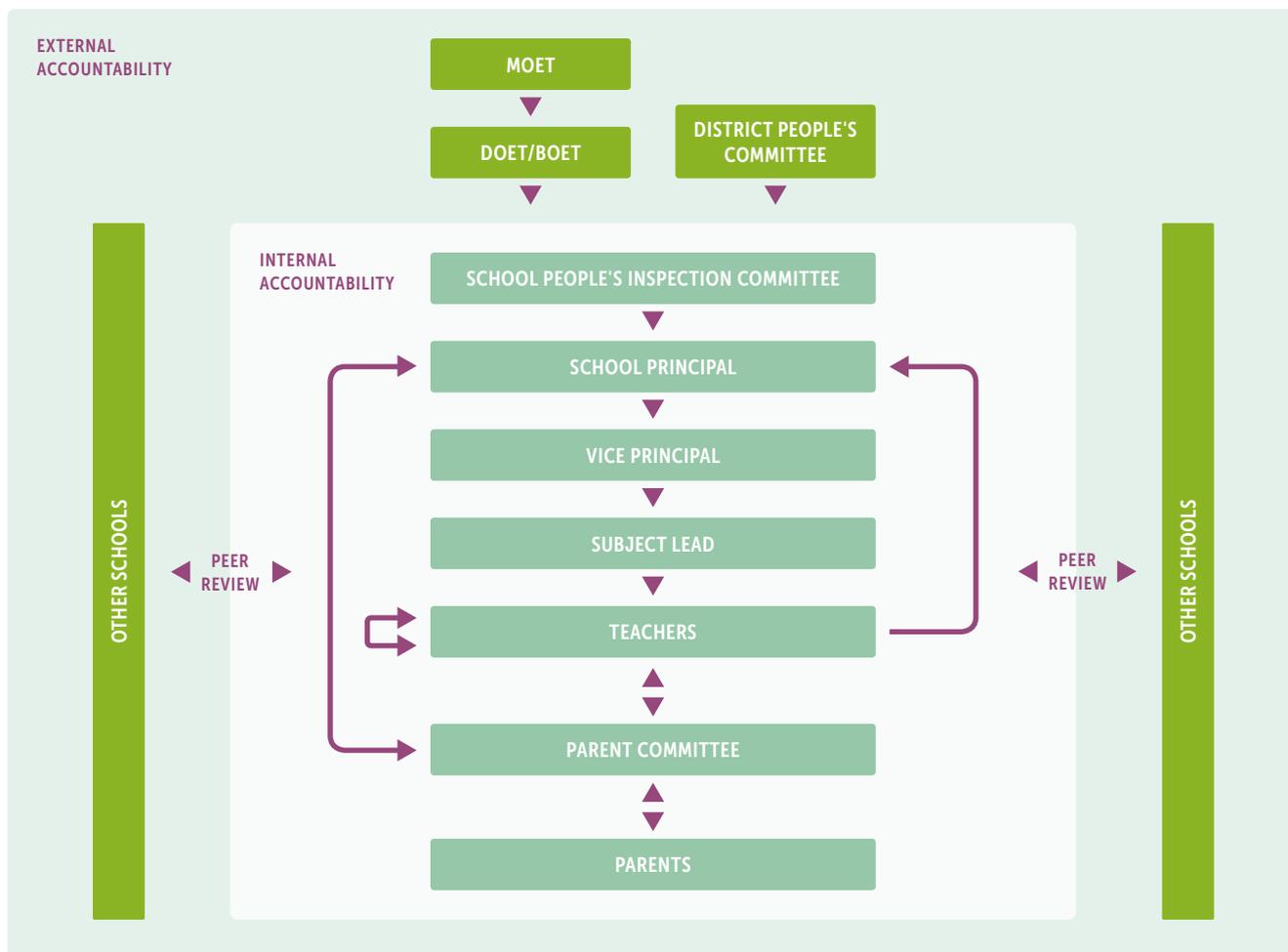
Based on our research we have identified the following distinctive aspects of the accountability system in Vietnam.

- Self-review and review by the subject group are fundamental components of the internal accountability system.
- The school principal plays a central accountability role.
- Regulations promote high levels of parental involvement in the process of accountability.
- There is regular, highly challenging external accountability.

The conceptual framework for this chapter is drawn from our qualitative data collected in schools in Hanoi, Ha Giang and Binh Dinh, in addition to interviews with officials and policymakers at each provincial level. This data is further supported through an analysis of the school principal and student survey data from PISA 2012 and 2015.

Accountability is provided not just through formal internal arrangements such as school governance and formal external scrutiny through school inspections

FIGURE 9: RELATIONSHIPS OF ACCOUNTABILITY IN VIETNAM (ARROWS REPRESENT RELATIONSHIP OF ACCOUNTABILITY)



Self-review and internal review by the subject group

The Vietnamese teachers that we interviewed described to us how they were involved in a continuous cycle of professional dialogue linked to the accountability system. One distinctive aspect of the system is that the performance of every teacher is formally graded on a regular basis through peer review. Each teacher is a member of a 'subject group'. Teachers within the group collectively grade each other and the results are reported upwards to the school principal.

Accountability starts with the individual professional. Teachers in Vietnam are personally required to analyse their own strengths and weaknesses and identify developmental priorities. This personal view of performance is then tested with peers who work closely with the teacher. The accountability system begins therefore with both the individual professional and the immediate team within which the teacher operates.

There is a formal requirement for each teacher to self-assess her or his own work. This requirement is set out in Circular 30 of 2009,⁵⁶ which describes how self-

Teachers in Vietnam are personally required to analyse their own strengths and weaknesses and identify developmental priorities

⁵⁶ Circular No. 30/2009/TT-BGDĐT

assessment is mandatory for all teachers. Teachers are expected to identify their own strengths and weaknesses and to provide evidence to support the analysis against a set of criteria. Teachers must then assess their overall strengths and weaknesses, and write a commentary on how they plan to further enhance their strengths and tackle their weaknesses.⁵⁷ They categorise themselves using a four-point scale: poor, medium, good or excellent.

This process of self-assessment is, in turn, moderated by the teacher's immediate peers. Vietnamese school teachers are members of teams, and team members provide each other with both challenge and support. One particularly important team is the subject group, which has a designated subject lead who reports to the school principal on group findings regarding teacher quality and coordinates the work of the subject team.

Our witnesses suggested the subject lead was an important role within the Vietnamese government school and one that has previously received insufficient attention in the literature. Subject leads combine an accountability function with a strong orientation towards professional development. Subject leads do not act alone; they review individual teacher quality in conjunction with other members of the subject group.

I am the head of the subject group. Every month we visit classes, assess the teaching quality and report the results for each teacher to the principal and vice-principals (Ha Giang primary school teacher).

We form an evaluation group of two or three people to observe each teacher's lesson and make an evaluation. This approach is applied to all teachers of all subjects at the school (Binh Dinh primary school teacher).

Assessment of teaching quality is conducted very regularly and thoroughly – on a weekly, monthly and semester basis. Within each subject group, the subject lead and other teachers often visit the teacher's class to support and provide feedback after each lesson (Ha Giang primary school teacher).

MOET regulates the functioning of the subject group within the Vietnamese government school. Official MOET 'charters' set out requirements for team or 'group' activities including peer monitoring. The following extract is taken from Article 16 of *The Charter of Middle Schools, High Schools and Multi-Level Schools*:⁵⁸

1. *The Principal, Vice Principals, teachers, officers in charge of the library and educational equipment, and counselling staff for secondary school students shall be organised into professional groups by subject, subject area, or activity group at each middle or high school level. Each professional group shall have a leader and 1 or 2 deputy leaders under the management and direction of the Principal, and appointed by the Principal on the basis of introduction by the professional group, and assigned tasks at the beginning of the school year.*

2. *Professional groups shall have the following duties:*

a) *To develop and implement general activity plans for groups, guide the development and management of individual plans for group members based on teaching plans, and apportion curriculum and other educational activities of the school;*

Vietnamese school teachers are members of teams, and team members provide each other with both challenge and support

⁵⁷ See Circular No. 30/2009/TT-BGDĐT Appendices for teacher assessment forms ⁵⁸ Circular No. 12/2011/BGDĐT, Article 16

b) To organize professional development activities; participate in the assessment and ranking of members of the group in accordance with the professional standards for secondary school teachers and other regulations in force;

c) To induct group leaders and deputy leaders;

d) To propose commendation and disciplinary action for teachers.

3. *A professional group shall hold an activity once every two weeks and may have additional meetings as required by work or at the request of the Principal.*

The subject team must assess each teacher through peer review to determine the accuracy of the teacher's own self-assessment. Crucially, evidence should include both planning documents and lesson observation.⁵⁹ It is the task of the team to advise each teacher on a plan for professional development and to inform the school principal about performance levels.

The accountability role of the school principal

School principals play a pivotal role in the internal accountability system. Principals told us how they received regular reports from subject groups about teaching quality relating to each individual teacher. There is a particular requirement for the principal to verify judgements from peer review if a teacher receives 'excellent' or 'poor' on the four-point scale of quality. In addition to this moderation role, school principals play a direct role in monitoring the quality of teaching.

[There are] two ways for teacher evaluation: [principal] class visits and the subject group. I visit each teacher [formally] once per year, and the subject group will visit eight times a year (Ha Giang secondary school principal).

One subject lead explained that the subject team peer review system was fundamentally the responsibility of the principal. The principal took seriously the data from the subject group but also personally gathered evidence and verified the peer judgements.⁶⁰

The head of each subject reports to the principal. The subject group assesses individual teachers' lesson plans and reports, but at the highest level the principal oversees everything. She visits the classes to evaluate teacher's teaching quality, utilises experienced teachers and provides more training for less experienced ones (Binh Dinh subject lead and secondary school teacher).

Teachers explained how principals made both formal visits and occasional 'unannounced' visits to keep teachers 'on their toes'.

Our witnesses described the monitoring of classroom quality as an essential task for principals:

I am very involved in the assessment of teachers' quality and I often gave them advice. I visit their classes and provide honest feedback (Binh Dinh secondary school principal).

Both in 2012 and 2015 the PISA survey involved students and principals completing questionnaires that shed additional light on internal accountability procedures. The

Principals told us how they received regular reports from subject groups about teaching quality relating to each individual teacher

⁵⁹ See Circular No. 30/2009/BGDĐT Chapter 1, Article 3 for a classification of what constitutes evidence ⁶⁰ All school principals interviewed in fieldwork in Ha Giang, Binh Dinh and Hanoi supported this interpretation

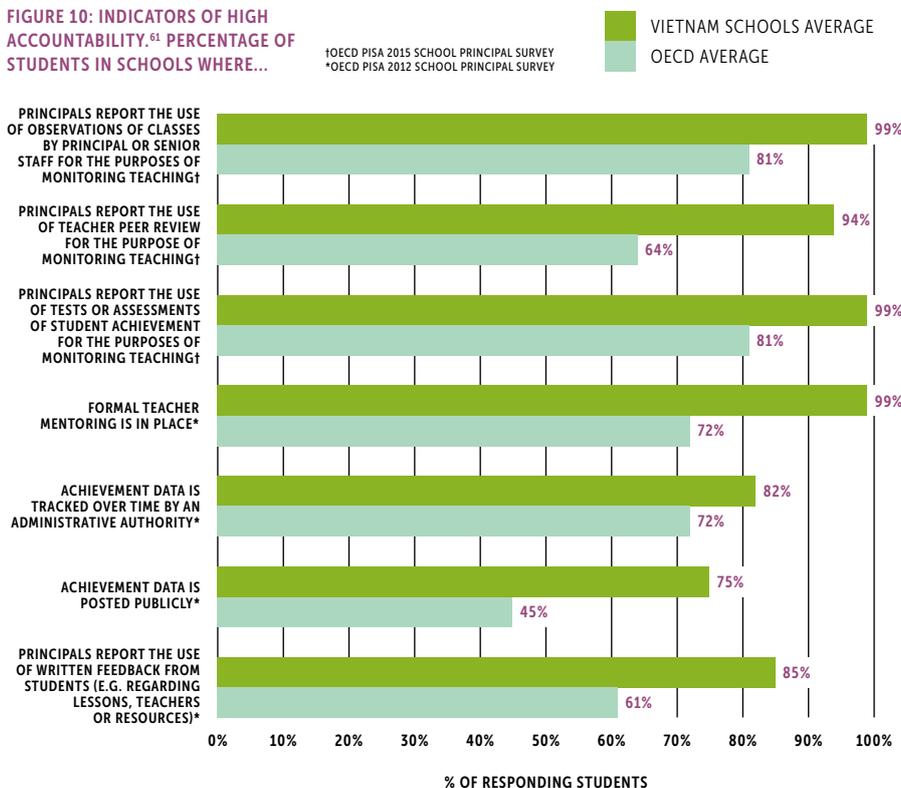
principals' surveys strongly reinforce the picture that emerged from our interviews of the Vietnamese government school as a highly accountable organisation.

In several key areas the Vietnam data suggests that practice in the country involves a wider range of accountability activities than is the norm in richer OECD countries. These accountability activities include:

- systematic lesson observation by principals
- peer review of teaching quality
- feedback from students
- public transparency regarding student achievement
- using test data to monitor teaching quality
- linking teacher performance management and opportunities for mentoring

In several key areas the Vietnam data suggests that practice in the country involves a wider range of accountability activities than is the norm in richer OECD countries

FIGURE 10: INDICATORS OF HIGH ACCOUNTABILITY.⁶¹ PERCENTAGE OF STUDENTS IN SCHOOLS WHERE...



Encouraging parental involvement in the process of accountability

Government regulations give parents an important role, at least in theory, in the processes of accountability. Our fieldwork generated evidence to support the idea that parents are a prominent part of the system, although some of our expert witnesses suggested there was sometimes a gap between the theory of the regulations and the practice, which was sometimes less impressive.

⁶¹ OECD (2016b, 149); OECD (2013, 153, 243)

The regulations describe how parental accountability should work in two directions. In one direction parents hold schools to account. This is to be done formally through Parent Boards, and informally through direct contact between school principals and teachers and parents about individual student performance. In the other direction the education system holds parents accountable for the behaviour and performance of their own children in school. The regulations make it clear that children's academic performance is not the sole responsibility of the education system; parents must also play an important role.⁶²

Each school should have a Parent Board, the constitution of which MOET regulates centrally. There should be a Parent Committee at the level of every class, whose representatives sit on the whole school parent-representative Board. MOET regulations, *The Parents Committee Charter*,⁶³ stipulate the following for all government schools – from kindergarten to upper secondary:

Article 3.1 Class Parents Committee

- a)** *Each class has a parents committee comprising from 3 to 5 members, including a chair and a deputy chair.*
- b)** *Members of the class parents committee are enthusiastic persons, responsible for coordinating with the homeroom teacher, subject teachers, and school, and representing the parents of students in the class, [together] implementing educational activities for students.*

According to these regulations, there should be relatively even representation on the Parent Board of parents of children from different age groups across the school. The Parent Board plays an active role in the school. It is legally responsible for providing feedback on educational quality to the professionals in the school and for organising extra-curricular enrichment activities:

Article 4.2 Authority of the Class Parents' Committee

- a)** *To convene parent meetings as provided for in Article 9 of this Charter (except the beginning of school year meeting to appoint the class parents committee) after concurring with the homeroom teacher;*
- b)** *To collect class parents' opinions on how to manage student education so as to make specific recommendations to the homeroom and subject teachers on how to improve the quality of moral education and teaching;*
- c)** *To coordinate after-class educational activities, education about traditions, and cultural, arts and sporting activities, towards a goal of comprehensive education for students, after agreement with the homeroom teacher.⁶⁴*

Some of our expert witnesses questioned whether these arrangements were always fully effective in practice. Perhaps anxious to portray their school in a positive light, teachers and principals we interviewed did not make this point. Instead they were keen to suggest that Parent Boards played an important role in their schools.

The Students Parents Board participate in checking activities relating to teachers' teaching activities, day-boarding activities, quality of meals for children... For example, the students' parents may come to the school's

The regulations make it clear that children's academic performance is not the sole responsibility of the education system; parents must also play an important role

⁶² See Circular No. 55/2011/BGDĐT for the roles and responsibilities of parents ⁶³ Circular No. 55/2011/BGDĐT, Article 3.1 ⁶⁴ Circular No. 55/2011/BGDĐT, Article 4.2



kitchen to check the quality of food and they may attend a class observation to see what teaching methods are applied (Ha Giang primary school principal).

[There are] good relationships between the school and parents. We hold three meetings yearly, and we ask them for feedback and recommendation. They can also call us or meet directly at any place or situation. We listen to different perspectives. They are very democratic, and friendly, not afraid of offending us (Binh Dinh secondary school principal).

The same regulations that set out the parental role in holding schools to account also describe how parents should be held to account for ensuring their own children's good behaviour and performance in school. Parents are entitled to ask difficult questions of the work of the professionals but are also personally responsible 'for their children's mistakes and faults'.

Article 8. Responsibilities and rights of parents⁶⁵

1. Responsibilities of parents:

- a)** *To coordinate with the school in managing and educating students and to perform duties assigned by the parents committee.*
- b)** *To coordinate with the homeroom and subject teachers to care for, manage, and motivate students to be active, self-aware learners, to practice ethics, and to abide by the regulations of the Charter and rules of the school.*
- c)** *To take responsibility for their children's mistakes and faults in accordance with the law, and to implement recommendations of the class parents committee in coordination with the school, to care for, manage and educate students.*

2. Rights of parents

- a)** *Parents have the rights provided for in Article 95 of the Law on Education, and the right to make recommendations to the school to facilitate their children's learning and practice;*
- b)** *To nominate or be nominated as a candidate for a class parents committee:*
- c)** *To refuse support when a class or school parents committee requests support, if support is not voluntary.*
- d)** *To implement or not to implement ideas that have not yet been agreed upon at a meeting of all parents or meeting of the parents committee.*

While this may seem an impressive model for partnership between professionals and parents, it is impossible to tell, based on our limited fieldwork, exactly how well the theory set out in these regulations works in practice across the many diverse provinces of Vietnam. Our expert witnesses urged caution in any assumptions about the consistency and universality of practice. At the same time, teachers and principals gave a positive view of parental partnership.

Some school-based witnesses suggested that pressure from parental expectations was growing. One vice principal from a Hanoi school told us about raised expectations from parents and students themselves:

The same regulations that set out the parental role in holding schools to account also describe how parents should be held to account for ensuring their own children's good behaviour and performance in school

⁶⁵ Circular No. 55/2011/BGDĐT, Article 8

The awareness of students and their parents is now far different from it was previously. Their assessment is now very correct and proper. Therefore, teachers should try their best to prove themselves to students and parents' students (Hanoi vice principal, lower secondary).

Regular, challenging external accountability

Several bodies external to the school play an important role in monitoring school performance. The two most important sources of external accountability are DOET or BOET, depending on the phase of the school, and the local bodies that represent the Communist Party of Vietnam.

Across Vietnam DOET is responsible for monitoring school performance at upper secondary level, with BOET carrying out identical functions at primary and lower secondary. Schools are constantly monitored by these bodies.

Principals described the importance of the frequent regular meetings during which they report on progress to DOET or BOET officials. In addition to this ongoing monitoring, schools must be formally inspected at minimum every five years. If they are found to need more support, or are considered to be underperforming, inspections will be conducted more frequently. In addition to these comprehensive inspections, which cover all aspects of school performance and facilities, 'thematic' checks or reviews take place every year. The focus for such reviews might be teacher performance, how the school principal is managing the budget or how well the school is implementing a particular policy.

They inspect many things: the principal's activities, even how I update and record documents, how I assign teachers, how I manage (Hanoi secondary school principal).

The monitoring is conducted frequently. For example, DOET frequently check the implementation of tasks in school, local authorities inspect the socialisation in education (Ha Giang lower secondary school principal).

School principals are required to keep records of how policies have been implemented, which DOET and BOET then use to determine effectiveness, and to alert other state authorities. DOET and BOET are also responsible for monitoring teaching quality. This may be done through the comprehensive inspections, or through additional *ad hoc* visits. This is likely to involve both checking the school principal's teacher performance management records and also directly assessing teachers against official teaching quality standards through classroom observation.

BOET and DOET also require schools to compare practice with other schools. Schools in Vietnam are placed in groups of three and conduct peer review of one another using standard review frameworks. As with internal peer review within schools, peer review that takes place between schools is also a form of both challenge and support. One education expert from VNIES described the official process for school-to-school peer review in Vietnamese schools:

Apart from BOET doing checks with schools, there are the triangulation or cross-checking mechanisms between and among schools... not just principals

The two most important sources of external accountability are DOET or BOET... and the local bodies that represent the Communist Party of Vietnam

but also subject head teachers... the written report must be lodged with BOET (expert in general education).

The central MOET also plays an active monitoring role through the collection of school performance and quality data and through conducting school inspections when problems are reported. DOET and BOET collect data and carry out inspections at school level, reporting results back to MOET. This not only creates a system of accountability but also supports a system whereby MOET understand problems with policy implementation.

One recent example of MOET's involvement in actively conducting school inspections took place after parents in four provinces were complaining about demands for fees in primary schools, where parents should not be subject to tuition fees. This was reported in various Vietnamese media sources.⁶⁶ MOET responded to this by conducting surprise inspections in these schools across four provinces, collecting evidence to support or counter the allegations. The schools found guilty of charging inappropriate fees were sanctioned and forced to repay parents.

One Ha Giang secondary school principal said to us, *'My work is monitored by many parties.'* This is not an exaggeration. In addition to being subject to inspection by DOET and BOET, schools are answerable to local representatives of the Communist Party. The work of each school is monitored by a political Board within the school:

*The school board includes representatives of the Communist Party of Viet Nam, the Rector and Vice Rector, representatives of the Trade Union, representative of the Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth Union, General Team, representative office team.*⁶⁷

These political Boards are distinct from the Parent Boards described above. The political Boards have wide-ranging powers according to the regulations:

- a)** *To decide on the objectives, strategies, projects and development plans of the school in each period and each school year;*
- b)** *To decide on the Regulation or to amend and supplement the Regulation on organisation and operation of schools for submission to competent authorities for approval;*
- c)** *To decide on the policy on the use of finance and assets of the school;*
- d)** *Monitoring of school activities; supervise the implementation of the resolutions of the School Board, the implementation of the regulations of democracy in school activities.*⁶⁸

School principals confirmed in our interviews the importance of political supervision.

The main monitoring focus of the people's inspection Board is on leadership and direction (Ha Giang secondary school principal).

The principal is controlled by superiors such as the Board of People's Inspection in the school, the District Inspectorate, the People's Council and

The central MOET also plays an active monitoring role through the collection of school performance and quality data and through conducting school inspections when problems are reported

⁶⁶ For example see Vietnamnet.vn (2017) ⁶⁷ Circular 41/2010/TT-BGDĐT, Article 23, Section 2a ⁶⁸ Circular 41/2010/TT-BGDĐT, Article 23, Section 3

organisations of the Communist Party of Vietnam, for example the Branch Communist Party of the school and the Party Committee of the Ward and District, then controlled by DOET (Hanoi primary school principal).

School principals are also held to account in a way similar to that which might be expected of political officials. Principals serve five-year terms, at the end of which they may be reassessed and re-accredited depending on the outcome of the evaluation. School principals can serve no more than two five-year terms in one school:

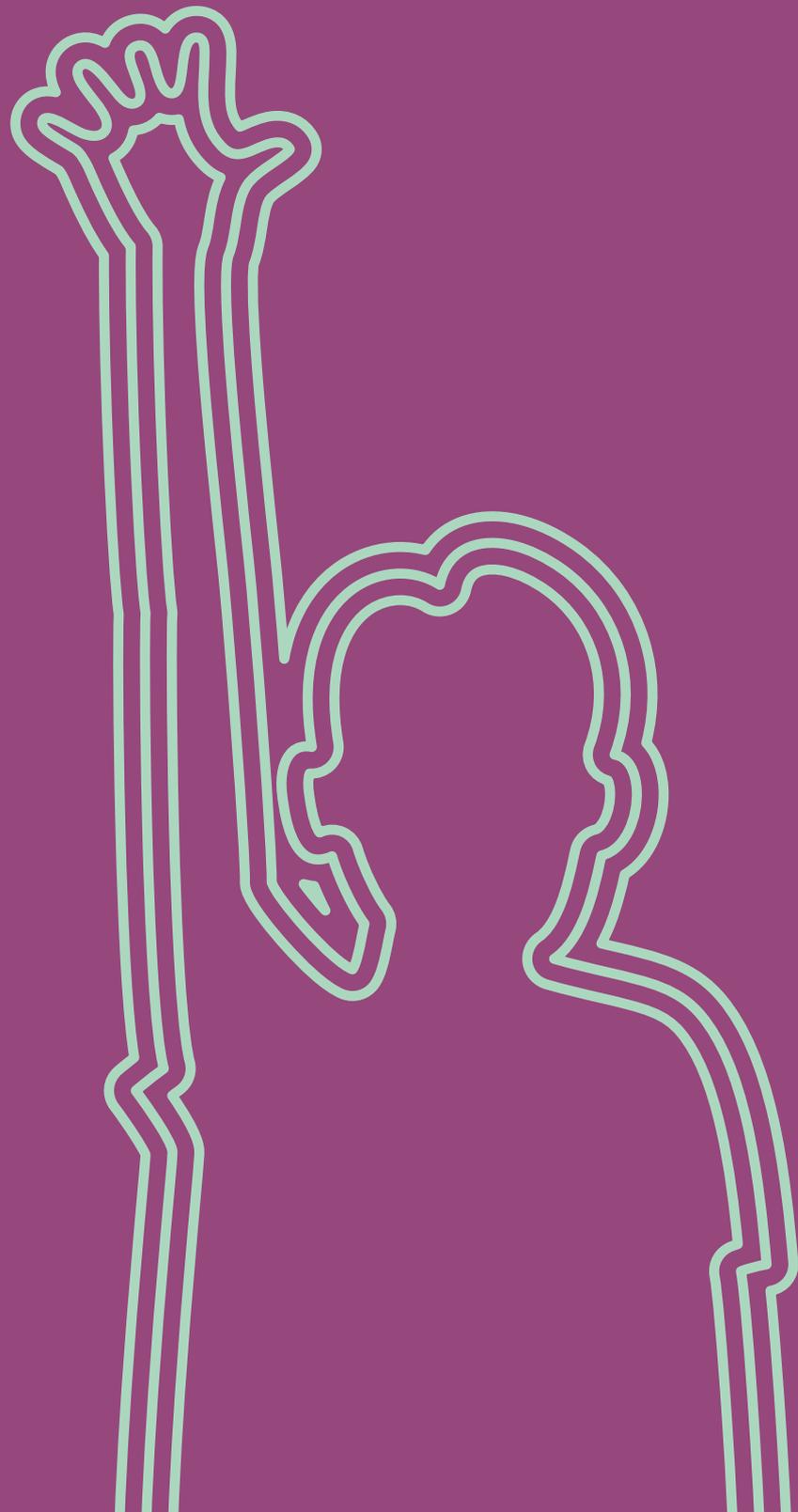
The term of a primary school principal is 5 years. After 5 years, the principal is evaluated and may be re-appointed or re-accredited. For a public primary school, the principal shall be in charge of a primary school for no more than two terms. Each principal is assigned to manage an elementary school.⁶⁹

Principals serve five-year terms, at the end of which they may be reassessed and re-accredited depending on the outcome of the evaluation

⁶⁹ Circular No. 55/2011/BGDĐT, Article 20, Section 3

Chapter 6

The quality of teaching



One particularly important component of any school system is the quality and productivity of the teaching workforce.

Our investigation highlighted four important features of the teacher workforce in Vietnam:

- Teachers see themselves as members of a respected profession, although they strongly believe they are underpaid.
- The government of Vietnam has ensured the teacher workforce is better qualified than ever.
- Informal professional learning opportunities are provided through in-school monitoring systems and the work of the 'subject group'.
- Teachers described how they used a mix of traditional and more modern methods.

This chapter draws heavily on our qualitative fieldwork data in Hanoi, Ha Giang and Binh Dinh with school principals, teachers, pedagogical college lecturers and education officials. Qualitative data from our Ho Chi Minh City fieldwork from *Interesting Cities* is also used. We also draw on data from our parental survey conducted by Ipsos Vietnam. Our own data is further supported by data from the Young Lives Vietnam surveys on teacher characteristics, in addition to school principal and student surveys from PISA 2012 and 2015.

Cultural norms and government policy both promote the idea that teaching is a particularly admirable occupation

Respected but underpaid

The teachers we interviewed often complained about their pay. At the same time, they made it clear they were proud to be members of such a respected profession. Cultural norms and government policy both promote the idea that teaching is a particularly admirable occupation.

The primary and secondary teacher standards highlighted the moral dimension to teaching as a profession, stating that teachers must love the profession, be devoted to training and be ready to overcome difficulties completing tasks.⁷⁰

We asked school-based interviewees *What makes an excellent teacher?* In response there were remarkable similarities between provinces, with an emphasis on the moral/ethical dimension and the idealism that should drive the work of a good teacher. Teachers typically mentioned first moral qualities then the technical pedagogical skills a highly effective teacher should have. There was a strong overlap between their responses and the standards for teacher professionalism published by MOET, which also emphasise these ethical/moral issues. Box 1 and 2 present responses typical among all interviewees who completed our pre-interview questionnaire.

⁷⁰ See Decision 05/2007/QĐ-BGDĐT, May 2007 for primary teacher standards and Circular No. 30/2009/TT-BGDĐT for secondary and high school teacher standards

BOX 1: WHAT MAKES AN EXCELLENT TEACHER? RESPONSE OF A PRIMARY SCHOOL TEACHER, HANOI

- Great passion for the teaching job and strong love for children; always keen to fulfil their functions and tasks with the heart of a teacher
- Willing to learn and up-skill themselves; constantly exploring and selecting active teaching methods that work appropriately with their students' characteristics
- Standing ready to support and sympathise with students on difficulties facing them in learning and life generally
- A great sense of responsibility
- Fair treatment to all students, without bias, discrimination or favouritism related to any particular individual
- Honesty and frankness
- Leading a simple, modest and economic life

BOX 2: WHAT MAKES AN EXCELLENT TEACHER? RESPONSE OF A PRIMARY SCHOOL TEACHER, HA GIANG

In terms of qualities of an excellent teacher, they must display an exemplary personality and have great love for the teaching profession as well as the children they teach. They must always serve as a mirror for all to reflect and maintain high standards and ethics in school, family and society. Overall, they must serve as a role model everywhere and all the time.

An excellent teacher must be one with a 'heart'. Accordingly, teachers must do everything for the benefit of children, without distinction among students, and share and encourage poor students to overcome adverse situations. Teachers with a warm heart will always be dedicated to the job they do, constantly learn to update and upgrade their knowledge and rise above the normal selfishness to stand high and with dignity. Teachers with a warm heart will also highly appreciate their own honest lifestyle as well as what they teach their students.

Furthermore, an excellent teacher must be ethical. This is one of the important factors that determines the success or failure of education. An excellent teacher must be an educator in its fullest sense. Being a teacher must be one with high dignity, of high ethical conduct and healthy lifestyle.

Teachers raised the question of pay many times. The below quotes echo the negative sentiments expressed in all teacher focus groups we conducted in Ha Giang, Hanoi and Ha Giang:

Payment is not high compared to other jobs. We have to leave home early, work in the evening to prepare for class and learn new methods. The pay is not high considering the amount of effort we put into teaching. We have to borrow from the banks to pay for many types of expenses. However, it's a very respectable profession (Ha Giang secondary school teacher).

But I myself would not encourage my own child to be a teacher as we must follow certain standards but we are poor (Hanoi secondary school principal).

Teachers raised
the question of
pay many times

The current teachers' salary is low and so they have to do a second job to support their children, buy houses and land. Because of that they can't focus on improving teaching quality (Ha Giang lower secondary school teacher).

Teachers consider they are badly paid although they also recognise that pay has improved in recent years. Teachers receive an incremental pay rise based on years of service, which means the most experienced teachers are paid over three times as much as the newest teachers. Bonuses are available for teachers whose performance is deemed excellent but the financial value of these is low.⁷¹ The following comments come from focus groups with Binh Dinh teachers:

- For teachers with more than 15 years of experience it's okay, but for the younger ones – actually they need to spend a lot, because their children are young – the income is too low.
- Many teachers have to do extra jobs.
- Compared with public security and military positions, there is a stark difference.
- After 39 years, my salary is 10,000,000 VND, (approximately \$439); for new teachers it's about 3,000,000 VND (approximately \$131). So it's just barely enough.
- After a year of hard working, even if we earn an excellence award, we only receive 350,000 VND (approximately \$15) in bonus.

One Ha Giang secondary school teacher we interviewed compared teacher salaries with those of people working in unskilled retail jobs:

I have a Masters degree and have been a teacher for more than 10 years but my salary is only 6,000,000 VND. Meanwhile, a gas shop near my house is recruiting staff with a salary from 8,000,000–13,000,000 VND (Ha Giang secondary school teacher).

It is clear that many teachers supplement their income with after-school work as private tutors and other second jobs. Private tutoring is discouraged officially by the government but is widespread.⁷² Some teachers were reticent to talk much to us much about 'extra classes' but one Hanoi school principal was entirely open about this phenomenon:

Do our students attend extra private tuition? Sure. As you know, extra private tuition is the reasonable demand of their family and students themselves. So they attend extra private tuition (Hanoi secondary school principal).

Working with the market research organisation Ipsos Vietnam, we undertook a survey of 350 parents from four provinces. A total of 77% of them were paying private tutors to give their children tuition after school. These parents explained that almost all of these private tutors were 'by day' government school teachers. The parents in the survey were overall more economically advantaged than the general population so it is not possible to generalise from these findings but they do suggest the prevalence of private tuition. Although the government has for many years publicly disapproved of teachers giving these 'extra classes', private tuition remains prevalent and for many teachers probably generates a major part of their household income.

Teachers receive an incremental pay rise based on years of service, which means the most experienced teachers are paid over three times as much as the newest teachers

⁷¹ See Resolution No. 54/2011/NĐ-CP for teacher bonuses and salary increases based on years of experience ⁷² Decree No. 242/Prime Minister, 1993 prohibits compulsory and mass-scale extra classes at schools, and Circular No. 16/Prime Minister-Interministerial, 1993 stipulates the range of extra-classes that are considered legal. In addition, Circular No. 15/MOET, 2001 provides further prohibitive measures on extra classes. The latest regulation in 2012 (Circular No. 17, Regulations on Supplementary Education) stipulates teachers cannot teach extra classes to their own students, unless they gain official permission to do so by their supervisors. Should they be found in violation of this law teachers can face prosecution

Better qualified than before

Many of our witnesses described how the qualification level of the workforce had been reformed. After 2000 the government systematically sought to improve the pre-service qualification level for all Vietnamese government school teachers, while providing a 'catch-up' series of summer institutes for existing teachers so they were operating at a similar level. The importance of these reforms was reflected in many positive comments from our witnesses. Teaching today is much more 'professionalised' compared with at the start of the century, with many teachers qualified at post-graduate level or engaged in post-graduate study as part of their professional development.

Prior to 2006 teachers were trained in a rush... Since 2006, there are more specific criteria, so standardisation of the teacher force is taking place (Binh Dinh BOET official).

I think there has been a big improvement in quality. In 1999... I was very shocked because the teachers were trained as low as 6+3 [total years of education]... Within seven years the school has been standardised and the teachers have improved, not only in Binh Dinh but nationally (Binh Dinh pedagogical college lecturer).

There are many teachers with Masters degrees. 100% of teachers [in our school] meet the standards and 33% are above (Binh Dinh secondary school principal).

I have to say that it has improved a lot in the past 10 years. In 2005 we had three teachers with Masters degrees. Now we have 60% with Masters degrees (Ha Giang upper secondary vice principal).

There is evidence from other sources that teachers in Vietnam often have a good level of subject-related knowledge. Data from PISA 2015 shows that in science lessons students in Vietnam are more likely to be taught by a teacher with a degree and major in science than students in OECD countries on average. According to principals in Vietnamese schools participating in PISA, 92.4% of science teachers possessed a university degree and a major in science. This is a very high figure in international terms and compared well with the OECD average of 73.8%.⁷³

Data from PISA 2015 shows that in science lessons students in Vietnam are more likely to be taught by a teacher with a degree and major in science than students in OECD countries on average

Informal professional learning and the work of the 'subject group'

One of the most distinctive features of the Vietnamese government school is the role of the subject group. This is both an accountability mechanism and a forum for professional development based on classroom-level peer coaching. Subject teachers observe each other, grade each other's teaching and provide diagnostic feedback. This is all coordinated by the subject lead. One of our witnesses, a subject lead from Binh Dinh province, emphasised the 'nurturing' and 'problem-solving' dimensions of the dialogue:

I am the head of a subject, responsible for activities within the group as required by the school. I have gained a lot of experience throughout the years

⁷³ OECD (2016b, 279)

of teaching, for example in teaching methods, solving different situations that arise during a lesson and nurturing the talents [of teachers] (Binh Dinh upper secondary school subject lead).

Other teachers made a similar point. Visits from the subject team are part of the accountability regime but they are often welcomed because of the developmental, problem-solving approach that is adopted. There is a collegiate quality to the best of the accountability conversations:

Lesson reviews among teachers are very helpful, the teacher can choose a topic or a lesson that they feel not confident about, then after this period everyone can help solve the problem (Binh Dinh secondary school teacher).

We form groups to review lessons, twice a month. We also discuss during break time. Sometimes teachers are competitive, they want to perform as well as other teachers. We are willing to share with each other, because each of us works differently, and sharing helps decide which ways will be most effective. When we help our colleagues we are also able to help ourselves, that's very good (Ha Giang secondary school teacher).

We learn a lot from class visits... the feedback is very honest and helpful and not superficial (Ha Giang secondary school teacher).

The regular classroom visits principals make to observe teaching also appear to provide an important form of pedagogical coaching for teachers. Whether visits are formal or informal, in each case the outcome is expected to be some form of diagnostic professional feedback. So, as with the subject group, monitoring by principals is about coaching teachers as well as grading teaching quality. All school principals interviewed indicated they sought to play an important role in helping teachers improve.

The prevalence of in-school mentoring of teachers is also indicated by PISA 2015 data, which suggested that almost all Vietnamese teachers in the PISA sample were involved in mentoring relationships, a much higher rate than the OECD average.

In addition to a continuous round of pedagogical reflection via engagement with the subject group, teachers in Vietnam are encouraged to seek out opportunities for professional development independently. Teacher responsibility for professional development activity is expected and is stipulated in regulations. Circular 32 for example states that teachers must act to improve their capacity and the quality of their teaching.

Formal professional development related to new initiatives has been relatively conventional in the past. The roll-out of new policies has often made use of a cascade model whereby a designated teacher receives off-site training in the form a 'training of trainers' workshop and is then expected to deliver the training when back at school. With support from the World Bank the government is currently running a project intended, among other things, to improve formal professional learning for school teachers. The *Enhancing Teaching Education Programme* (ETEP) is intended to run from 2016 to 2021 and is based on a view that formal professional development has been typically weak in the past and there is a need for a new emphasis on school-based professional development in line with international best practice.

All school principals interviewed indicated they sought to play an important role in helping teachers improve

Teacher accounts of a blend of traditional and more modern pedagogy

There has been a debate in Vietnam for more than 20 years on the need for more engaging, interactive teaching. During these years the government, encouraged by international agencies, has consistently promoted the idea that traditional Vietnamese pedagogy is inadequate for a modern school because students play too passive a role. Vietnamese students may be good at recalling factual knowledge but can they apply knowledge to unfamiliar problems in the way needed in a modern workforce? Influenced by this thinking, the Education Law of 1998 required teachers to develop:

*... the activeness, voluntariness, initiative and creativeness of the pupils in conformity with the characteristics of each form and subject, fostering the method of self-teaching, training their ability to apply knowledge to practice.*⁷⁴

Many of our interviews reflected the debate on the need for a new 'student-centred' pedagogy.⁷⁵ The views expressed were complex. Some interviewees suggested traditional pedagogy was a real weakness at the beginning of the century but had now been replaced by a much more engaging and modern student-centred pedagogy. Others were sceptical about the extent of the change. Teachers and principals often took a different approach and spoke in terms of a mixed economy of modern and traditional methods.

The view that pedagogy had been transformed from largely 'bad' 'teacher-centred' methods to modern, 'good' 'student-centred' methods was articulated, for example, in the following comments from two of our witnesses in Ho Chi Minh City.

From 2001 till now, the style of pedagogy has changed significantly. The biggest difference is that 15–20 years back the teacher dictated in the classroom and students just listened passively to what the teacher said. It was a one-way style of communication. However, from 2001 the teacher has played the role of designer and facilitator for students to learn. This is the great change, in my opinion. MOET has introduced many new teaching methods such as active teaching and learning methods, problem-solving methods... through various training sessions and we have also sent our teachers for such trainings (Ho Chi Minh City school principal).

The style of pedagogy 10–15 years ago was the traditional one in which teachers taught and students listened and noted down. This was a one-way transfer of knowledge and skills. Thereafter, a further step from traditional teaching method is called active teaching, which involves issue-based teaching and enquiry-based learning. These latter methods have created conditions for students to promote their own abilities to discover and investigate issues for solving. Through these methods, it is easier to detect students' talents, including in-born aptitude. However, together with the active teaching method, it would not be possible to fully abolish the traditional one, which is necessary to impart core knowledge. By and large, the teaching method that is currently

Many of our interviews reflected the debate on the need for a new 'student-centred' pedagogy

⁷⁴ Cited in Ng and Nguyen (2006, 36) ⁷⁵ This debate was raised in all teacher FGDs in Ha Giang, Hanoi and Binh Dinh, in addition to five of the six education expert interviews. In the majority of FGDs, the topic was raised without prompting. Education experts were specifically asked questions about child-centred pedagogies and associated laws



applied is the one that sees the child as the centre. This is also well in line with the guiding principle set out by MOET. Also, this is a big change compared with 15–20 years. At that time, the teacher-centred method was predominantly used in which teacher imparted knowledge to students in a one-way fashion and students were simply the passive recipients of whatever was transferred by the teacher. In recent times, however, the teaching method has changed substantially. With the student-centred method, teachers only play the role of a facilitator and leave the room for students to work themselves. This teaching method has encouraged students to study more actively and passionately. Accordingly, their ability to grasp knowledge and skills is far better than the one applied previously. This teaching method has been applied across Ho Chi Minh City, including both the inner city and outer districts (Ho Chi Minh City BOET official).

Some expert witnesses had quite a different view and believed that any changes were largely superficial and that much practice remained highly traditional and of limited effectiveness. One expert at VNIES considered that teachers knew what was 'expected' and could put on a show, for example during a teaching competition, but everyday pedagogy had changed little:

It's not that teachers don't know about the existence of new teaching methods, they do but it's just a matter of whether they want to use them... Excellent teaching methods are demonstrated in many teaching competitions or festivals... which shows that it's not true that the teachers don't know about these methods, they do. But in terms of daily practice, that's a different story (education expert, general education).

Many of the teachers and school principals we interviewed told yet another story, describing a mixed-methods approach that drew on what teachers saw as the best of both traditional and modern methods. MOET has not explicitly approved this hybrid approach but tolerates it as long as the outcomes meet the required standard.

Currently, in my school, both the traditional approach and the new teaching approaches are combined to teach students. In doing so, we have drawn the best of both approaches combined together. Specifically, when it comes to the traditional approach, teacher play an active role in terms of transferring core knowledge and skills to students, using textbooks and guidebooks as the key direction. When it comes to the new approaches, we have allowed the use of modern teaching methods such as groupwork, inquiry-based approaches, active teaching and learning... By doing this, we make sure to impart necessary knowledge and skills as well as attitudes to students while leaving the room for them to be the real practitioners in the real context (Ho Chi Minh City teacher).

MOET has proposed many teaching methods to teachers, so they can combine or integrate these methods, find one they think most suitable, with the ultimate goal to convey the knowledge to students most effectively. Teachers should be allowed to use various teaching methods, and even assessment methods, but of course still based on some regulation, not just entirely on their own (Binh Dinh BOET official).

Some expert witnesses had quite a different view and believed that any changes were largely superficial and that much practice remained highly traditional and of limited effectiveness

Ultimately the authorities in Vietnam do not prescribe teaching methods. Various 'student-centred' practices have been promoted, but in the end schools and teachers decide what teaching methods they adopt in the classroom. In the final analysis, the Vietnamese system permits teachers to make most day-to-day decisions about teaching.

While in many ways Vietnamese schools are not autonomous compared with international norms, our witnesses made it clear that in terms of pedagogy, schools and teachers had a large measure of day-to-day decision-making power, which they said they used to support a mixed approach.

The school decides what methods to apply; this is the policy of the school... No method is universal, teachers must be flexible in organising their lessons to fit students. As a Grade 1 teacher, I need to use Grade 1-specific methods. We need to be flexible when it comes to methods of teaching (Ha Giang primary school teacher).

At my school teachers can make decisions 100% of the time as long as they achieve high learning outcomes. Each class is different so the teachers need to pick the most suitable ones (Binh Dinh primary school principal).

I have autonomy in my teaching approach as long as I meet the lesson objectives and am able to transfer the knowledge to students most effectively and help them understand thoroughly (Binh Dinh lower secondary school teacher).

Yes, we have to use multiple methods, and sometimes we should apply the traditional method in view of the unequal proficiency levels of the students (Ha Giang lower secondary teacher).

In my opinion, for teaching techniques, there is no universal method. The school encourages teachers to be flexible and creative depending on their subject area and their ability. However, for a not very good class, traditional methods are preferred, but for better classes, games, groupwork and brainstorming are preferred. So the teacher needs to be flexible to help children acquire knowledge (Ha Giang primary school teacher).

Different perspectives on the relative merits of student-centred methods or teacher-centred methods have also been manifest in the way Vietnamese teachers and parents have responded to the Viet Nam Escuela Nueva (VNEN) project. VNEN is based on Escuela Nueva, a well-known pedagogical programme that originated in Colombia and is now found in many countries. After a small pilot programme in 2010–2011, MOET endorsed VNEN and implemented it in 1,447 primary schools in deprived regions across Vietnam, with support from the World Bank and an \$84.6 million grant from the Global Partnership for Education.⁷⁶ Core components of the model include:⁷⁷

- participative and collaborative learning, including active learning, participative and collaborative learning, peer learning, cooperative learning and other similar terms to describe approaches where students are placed at the centre of the learning process
- cooperation and collaboration between small groups of learners intended to promote not only higher academic achievement but also independence, creativity and problem-solving

Various 'student-centred' practices have been promoted, but in the end schools and teachers decide what teaching methods they adopt in the classroom

⁷⁶ World Bank (2017) ⁷⁷ Parandekar et al. (2017)

- empowerment of the local community to ensure school life is integrated with the child's social and family life, including grandparents, and that local cultural practices are valued in the school

The VNEN model seeks to move teachers away from traditional approaches towards child-centred models, particularly the use of project-based group work. The World Bank impact evaluation of the VNEN pilot was positive in terms of improved learning outcomes.⁷⁸

Those teachers and principals we interviewed who were part of the VNEN project had mixed views about the effectiveness of the model, with the majority suggesting it was only partially effective and needed adaptation to the Vietnamese context. Teachers typically recognised that there were some important strengths to the student-centred approach promoted by VNEN but insisted there was a need to take the most promising aspects rather than adopt in its totality.

With the VNEN model, we are making use of its advantages, in a flexible manner! (Ha Giang primary school teacher).

I personally don't use the VNEN method but I find the support material helpful... This approach is best used for only a few lessons instead of applying it in every lesson. It is significantly better if we manage to apply the method flexibly (Hanoi primary school teacher).

Last year, according to the direction of DOET, the project ended. But schools are permitted to be autonomous and follow existing textbook programmes. We integrated VNEN methods into our lesson planning (Ha Giang primary school principal).

I understand that each teaching method has its own advantages and disadvantages. Considering VNEN, its advantages are to make student feel confident and able to express themselves as well as to improve presentation skills. It is great to educate students in these methods because it can make shy students more confident. However, in reality, it takes a huge effort from teachers to fully implement this method because the number of students is tremendous. Some students may fully participate in the lesson while others get neglected because teachers cannot monitor the whole activity of the lesson (Ha Giang primary school teacher).

As the above interview responses indicate, many teachers claimed that they responded to the experience of VNEN by absorbing the elements they liked the most into their own portfolio of pedagogical methods, selecting the most effective components from the model and integrating this within their wider pedagogical model. The Vietnamese teachers presented themselves as open-minded but also self-confident, looking to enhance rather than replace their existing practice. Few teachers who had been trained in the VNEN approach considered it to be without merit. Teachers were also unconvinced by the idea of adopting only one approach to teaching.

Further evidence about teaching styles in Vietnam is provided by the PISA data. In 2012 and 2015 the organisers of the PISA test asked a series of wide-ranging questions to students in the participating countries.

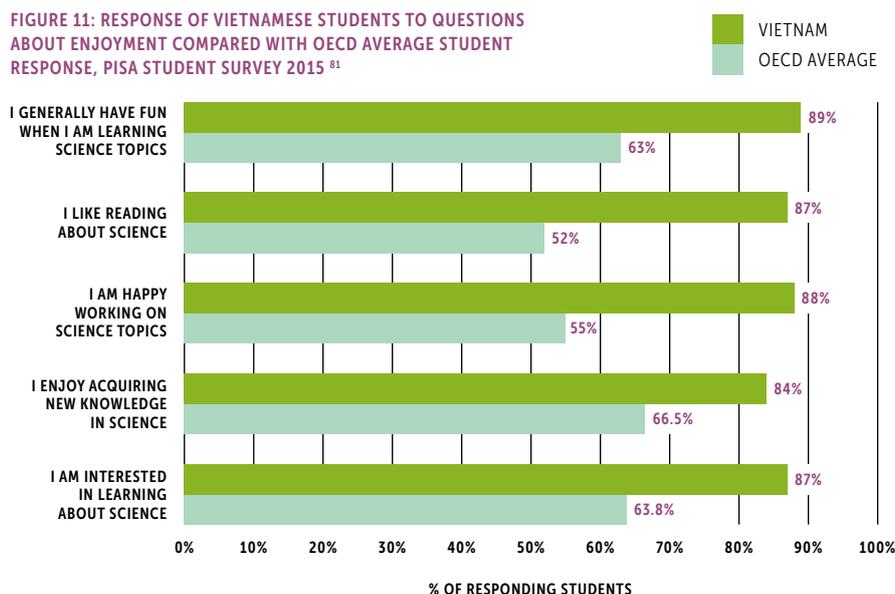
The Vietnamese teachers presented themselves as open-minded but also self-confident, looking to enhance rather than replace their existing practice

⁷⁸ Parandekar et al. (2017)

The PISA data indicates that the experience of learning in a Vietnamese government school is, according to this sample of students, often engaging and enjoyable. Students worldwide were asked a series of questions intended to ascertain how far they enjoyed learning science. The Vietnamese responses were strikingly enthusiastic: 89% of Vietnamese students in 2015 agreed with the statement *I generally have fun when I am learning science topics*.⁷⁹ Only one country in the world achieved a higher score. A total of 88% of Vietnamese students agreed with the statement *I am happy working on science topics*.⁸⁰ This was the highest positive response rate of all countries participating in PISA worldwide. There was little difference in these positive responses between boys and girls.

The PISA data indicates that the experience of learning in a Vietnamese government school is, according to this sample of students, often engaging and enjoyable

FIGURE 11: RESPONSE OF VIETNAMESE STUDENTS TO QUESTIONS ABOUT ENJOYMENT COMPARED WITH OECD AVERAGE STUDENT RESPONSE, PISA STUDENT SURVEY 2015⁸¹



The PISA commentary gave students from each country an overall rating – on the ‘index of enjoyment of learning science’ – based on the questions relating to how enjoyable they found studying science. The Vietnamese score of 0.65 was one of the highest in the world. Only two other participating countries achieved a higher score.⁸²

TABLE 12: AVERAGE SCORE OF VIETNAMESE STUDENTS ON INDEX OF ENJOYMENT OF LEARNING SCIENCE COMPARED WITH OECD AVERAGE STUDENT RESPONSE, PISA STUDENT SURVEY 2015

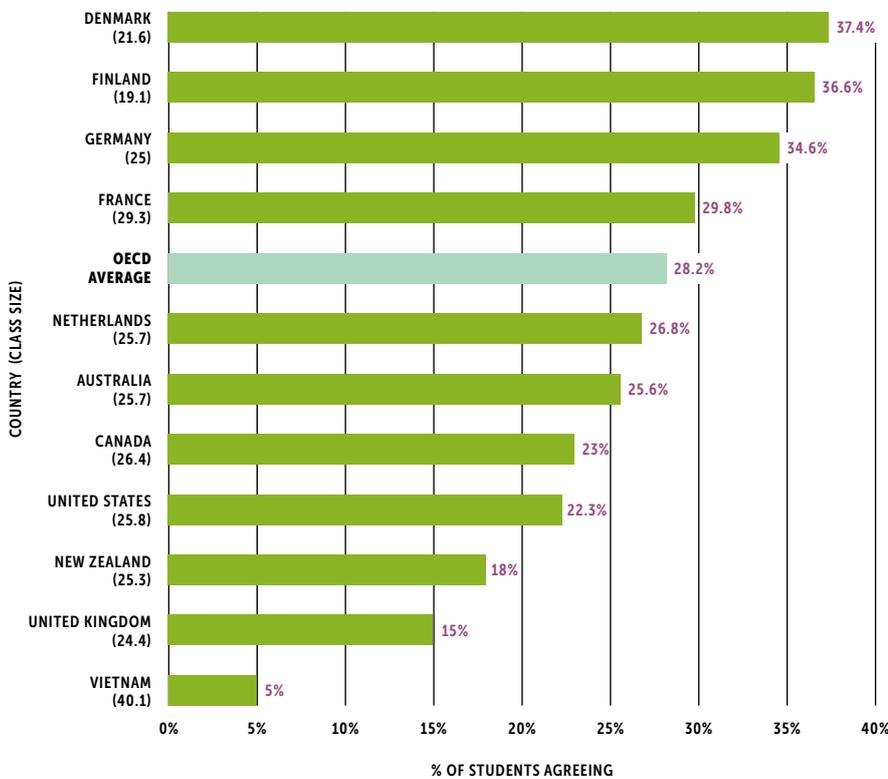
| Performance | Country | Average point score in PISA science, 2015 | Index of enjoyment of learning science based on student survey |
|--------------------|-----------------|---|--|
| Top 4 countries | Kosovo | 378 | 0.92 |
| | Albania | 427 | 0.72 |
| | Vietnam | 525 | 0.65 |
| | Indonesia | 403 | 0.65 |
| OECD mean | | 493 | 0.02 |
| Bottom 3 countries | Hungary | 477 | -0.23 |
| | Slovak Republic | 461 | -0.24 |
| | Netherlands | 509 | -0.52 |

⁷⁹ OECD (2016a, 122) ⁸⁰ OECD (2016a, 122) ⁸¹ OECD (2016a, 122) ⁸² OECD (2016a, 45)

The evidence from global researchers such as John Hattie suggests that high-quality individual feedback is one of the key characteristics of quality teaching.⁸³ One of the most interesting aspects of the PISA 2015 student survey was the evidence of the extent to which Vietnamese teachers appear to use diagnostic feedback as a central aspect of their pedagogical practice. According to the survey, Vietnamese students were less likely than any other students from any other country to agree with the statement *The teacher never or almost never tells me how I can improve my performance*. Only 5.0% of Vietnamese students agreed with this statement – the lowest percentage rate of all countries participating in PISA. The average rate of agreement with the statement from OECD countries was 28.0%.⁸⁴ This result is all the more impressive because, at 40.1, the average class size in a Vietnamese school is way above OECD norms and this must make the business of individual-level feedback more professionally challenging.

The evidence from global researchers such as John Hattie suggests that high-quality individual feedback is one of the key characteristics of quality teaching

FIGURE 12: PERCENTAGE OF STUDENTS WHO STATED THAT THEIR SCIENCE TEACHER ' TELLS ME HOW I CAN IMPROVE MY PERFORMANCE ' NEVER OR ALMOST NEVER ⁸⁵



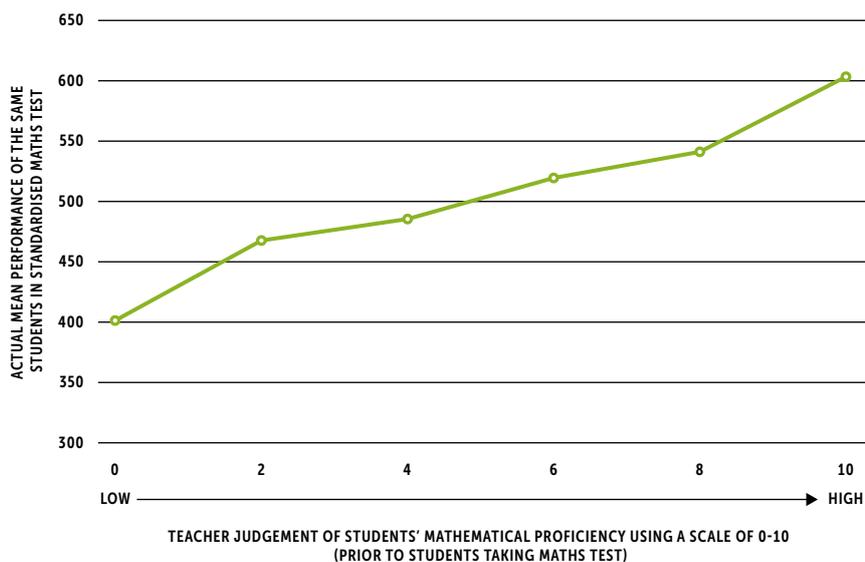
The responses of students who took part in the 2012 PISA student survey also suggested their teachers were concerned to ensure they received individualised support. Vietnamese students were more likely than any those from any other country in the world participating in PISA to agree with the statement *If I need extra help, I will receive it from my teachers*. The Vietnamese student response was 95% compared with an average response from students from OECD countries of 82%.⁸⁶

⁸³ See for example Hattie and Timperley (2007) ⁸⁴ OECD (2016b, 290) ⁸⁵ OECD (2016b, 290) ⁸⁶ OECD (2016b, 320)

Evidence from the Young Lives study further supports the idea that one of the longstanding strengths of the Vietnamese system is the extent to which teachers understand the cognitive level at which each individual student is operating within each core subject, and can therefore give accurate individual feedback.

During the Young Lives 2011–2012 study teachers were asked to grade their students' individual mathematics performance on a scale of 0–10. The same students were then given a standardised test in mathematics. As Figure 13 shows the teachers were, in effect, very successful in predicting the performance levels of their students.

FIGURE 13: AVERAGE TEST SCORES, BY TEACHER RATINGS OF PUPIL PERFORMANCE IN MATHEMATICS



One of the longstanding strengths of the Vietnamese system is the extent to which teachers understand the cognitive level at which each individual student is operating within each core subject, and can therefore give accurate individual feedback

In this Young Lives study, teacher judgements were extremely good predictors of test performance at the very low and very high levels. Teachers had a nuanced understanding of the difference between, for example, the characteristics of a very good student (worthy of an 8/10 teacher assessment) and an outstanding student (meriting a 10/10 teacher assessment).

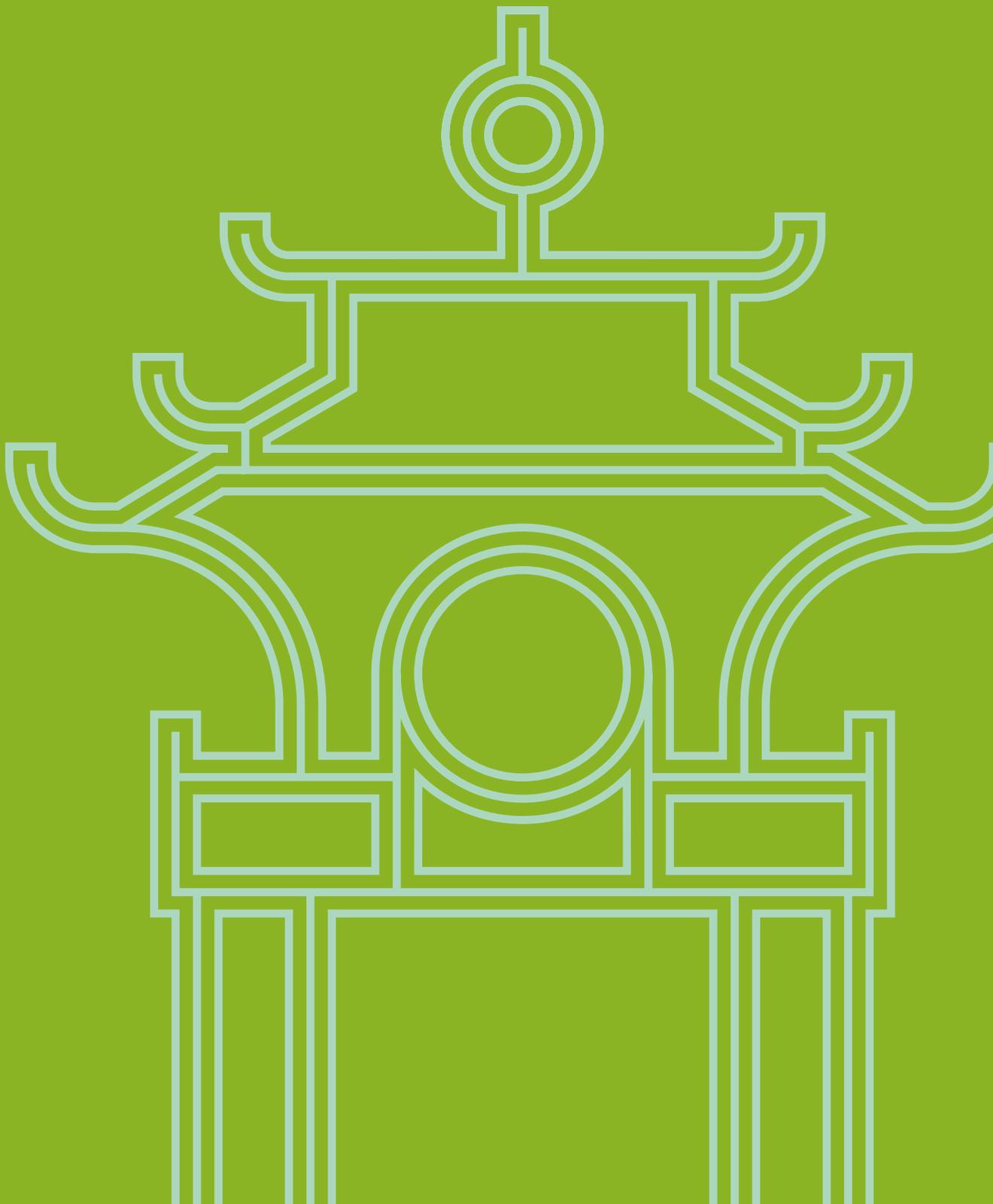
The PISA student survey in 2015 also asked questions intended to ascertain whether teaching had certain 'teacher-directed' characteristics. The responses of the Vietnamese students in the sample made it clear they did indeed frequently experience whole-class instruction. A total of 45.7% of Vietnamese students reported that in some lessons teachers explained scientific ideas.⁸⁷ Similarly, 54.8% indicated that in some lessons the teacher organised a whole-class discussion of a scientific topic.⁸⁸ It is interesting to put this in the wider context of the developing international debate about the need for high-quality whole-class instruction as well as enquiry-based learning. The overall global commentary to the main PISA report seems to reinforce the desirability of an element of teacher-directed instruction:

PISA results show that when teachers frequently explain and demonstrate scientific ideas, and discuss students' questions (known, collectively, as teacher-directed instruction), students score higher in science.⁸⁹

⁸⁷ OECD (2016b, 284) ⁸⁸ OECD (2016b, 284) ⁸⁹ OECD (2016b, 36)

Chapter 7

Instructional leadership



School principals are central to the functioning of government schools in Vietnam. In the highly accountable Vietnamese system the principal plays a key role, undertaking close monitoring of performance by teachers.

Our investigation and PISA data highlight the following issues:

- The role of the school principal is clearly defined.
- Many school principals see themselves as instructional leaders who spend much of their time encouraging teachers to improve their classroom practice.
- Principals were confident in the way they theorised about pedagogy.
- Compared with 'western' models of school leadership, principals have limited autonomy in certain areas of whole-school decision-making.

The responsibilities of principals are clearly described in MOET 'charters', which provide a framework for the governance of each school

Clear expectations

The responsibilities of principals are clearly described in MOET 'charters', which provide a framework for the governance of each school. When we asked principals about their responsibilities they often pointed out these were stated in the relevant charter.^{90, 91} The primary school charter defines the role broadly, as the single person responsible for internal management and educational quality: *'The principal of the primary school is the person responsible for organizing and managing the school's activities and quality of education.'*⁹² The charter makes it clear that the post is time-limited and fixed at five years. Re-appointment is possible for a second term but no one can serve more than 10 years.

*The term of the primary school principal is 5 years. After 5 years, the principal is evaluated and may be re-appointed or re-accredited. For a public elementary school, the principal shall be in charge of a primary school for no more than two terms.*⁹³

The charter gives a very wide-ranging list of responsibilities for principals, including oversight of whole-school plans. Important human resources duties are itemised: assigning staff to tasks and ensuring the performance management of staff. The principal has the right to designate vice principals and to assign staff to different groups or committees, and is also responsible for student behaviour, performance and welfare. Engagement with parents and the community is required in order to promote 'socialisation' – that is, the mobilisation of wider resources for the good of the school.

⁹⁰ For the primary school charter, see Circular No. 41/2010/TT-BGDĐT ⁹¹ For the middle and high school charter, see Circular No. 12/2011/TT-BGDĐT ⁹² Circular No. 41/2010/TT-BGDĐT, Article 20.1 ⁹³ Circular No. 41/2010/TT-BGDĐT, Article 20.3

BOX 3: DUTIES AND POWERS OF THE SCHOOL PRINCIPAL ⁹⁴

- a)** *To oversee the school development plan; Planning and organizing the implementation of teaching and learning plans; To report and evaluate the implementation results to the School Council and competent authorities;*
- b)** *Establishment of professional groups, office teams and advisory councils within the school; Appointing the head and deputy head;*
- c)** *Assignment, management, evaluation and classification; to participate in the process of recruitment, transfer; To commend and discipline the teachers and employees according to regulations;*
- d)** *Administrative management; to manage and effectively use the financial resources and assets of the school;*
- e)** *Managing students and organizing educational activities of the school; receiving and inducting new students; to decide on commendation, discipline, approval of evaluation results, grades, lists of students to be promoted to classes;*
- f)** *To inspect and certify the completion of primary education programs for pupils in schools and other subjects in their respective schools;*
- g)** *Attending political, professional and managerial training courses; two teaching periods per week; They are entitled to allowances and preferential policies according to regulations;*
- h)** *To implement the grassroots democracy regulations and create conditions for socio-political organisations in schools to raise the quality of education;*
- i)** *To socialize education, organize and mobilize social forces to participate in educational activities and bring into full play the role of the school for the community.*

While principals are responsible for many aspects of school life, those we interviewed attributed particular significance to the monitoring of educational quality

A focus on helping teachers improve their classroom practice

Significantly, the MOET primary school charter requires primary principals to maintain their status as practising teachers, with a minimum commitment of two teaching periods a week. The principal is, it seems, seen as a teacher and a leader of teachers. Our interviews with principals echoed this point. While principals are responsible for many aspects of school life, those we interviewed attributed particular significance to the monitoring of educational quality. One of our expert witnesses, a principal from Hanoi, placed teaching and learning at the top of the list of accountability areas:

In my opinion, a principal is mainly responsible for teaching and learning activities in the school to gain the best results. And in order to do this the principal must know how to manage well the finances of the school, monitor teaching of teachers in a reasonable way and know how to develop teachers, etc. to reach the greatest goal of promoting the teaching and learning activities of the school (Hanoi secondary school principal).

⁹⁴ Circular No. 41/2010/TT-BGDĐT, Article 20.5

Principals in Vietnamese government schools are often highly visible as monitors of teaching quality. Our focus groups with classroom teachers made clear that direct teacher classroom monitoring by principals was prominent. Lesson observation is accompanied with scrutiny by principals of teachers' planning documentation. The following comments from one focus group gives a sense of how teachers see the work of principals:

- *The principal and vice principals supervise us very thoroughly.*
- *The principal visits classes with or without warning to check how we prepare for classes. Assessments are conducted very carefully.*
- *In addition, traditional assessment methods are still in use, such as reviewing notebooks, student profiles, etc.*
- *The principals discuss with us how the classes went, very clearly.*
(Ha Giang secondary school teachers)

We asked school principals in Hanoi and Ha Giang to tell us about a typical day in their professional life. There were many similarities between their accounts. The monitoring of teacher classroom performance featured prominently in all the narratives.

One Hanoi primary school principal, described how, on a typical day, about three hours were devoted to '*checking the conduct of teaching and learning activities taking place in the school*'. One Ha Giang lower secondary school principal explained that lesson observation was one of three core activities of a typical day. Interestingly, the other two were checking that teachers as well as students were complying with school rules and holding meetings with staff and parents:

Every day I get to school at 6h45 and typically do the following: checking and supervising the implementation of internal regulations among teachers and students; observing classes as planned or unannounced; and working with relevant departments such as professional groups, administrative office, homeroom teachers and parents as and when necessary (Ha Giang lower secondary school principal).

This principal regularly spent time not only observing practice but also meeting 'professional groups'. Among the most important professional groups within a Vietnamese government school are the subject teams, and the partnership between the principal and the middle managers who are the heads of these is at the heart of the monitoring regime. Another principal described how lesson observation was undertaken in partnership 'with the relevant subject groups'.

A VNIES expert emphasised the close collaboration between the monitoring of the principal and the monitoring activities of the subject leads within the school.

Both the head teacher and the subject head must be responsible wholly for supervising the teachers' performance and... on a weekly basis the head teacher must observe various classes and check the quality in collaboration with the subject head and he also checks the lesson plan or syllabus prepared by teachers (education expert, K-12).

Among the most important professional groups within a Vietnamese government school are the subject teams, and the partnership between the principal and the middle managers who are the heads of these is at the heart of the monitoring regime

BOX 4: HANOI PRIMARY SCHOOL PRINCIPAL'S ACCOUNT OF A TYPICAL DAY

07:15 Reach the school

08:00–09:00 Checking the conduct of teaching and learning activities in classes, around the school and in subject rooms (may also combine class observation); checking the operations in specialist rooms.

09:00–09:20 Reading incoming letters/documents/circulars, scheduling relevant activities

09:40–10:00 Working with accounts on income and expenditure, approving relevant statements of income and expenditure

10:00–11:00 Approving outgoing communications, discussing business with relevant departments within the school, i.e. Management Board, General Affairs Executive, Administrative Office, Security and Cleaning Staff...

14:00–15:00 Checking the conduct of educational activities taking place in school

15:20–16:00 Reading incoming letters and scheduling relevant activities

16:00–17:00 Checking the conduct of teaching and learning activities taking place in the school

BOX 5: HA GIANG UPPER SECONDARY PRINCIPAL'S ACCOUNT OF A TYPICAL DAY

I reach school by 6h45.

I then check activities of the school prior to school time.

I check incoming–outgoing documents, and assign tasks to deputies and secretary of the School Education Council (all through emails).

I teach in the class (on the days when I teach) and observe classes together with relevant subject groups.

I check financials, administrative circulars, library operations... and urge relevant staff members to fulfil their responsibilities.

These accounts assumed that monitoring teaching quality was an essential responsibility of the principal in a Vietnamese government school. According to these accounts, the approach goes beyond checking for quality and compliance. Principals and teachers described the monitoring role as a developmental one. One Binh Dinh teacher pointed out how important it was that principals have experience as highly effective teachers so that the coaching provided has the greatest possible credibility and impact:

If the principal is a good teacher personally then the school will have better teachers, because when they observe classes they can help point out what needs to be improved. Also the teachers will feel inspired and will want to

One Binh Dinh teacher pointed out how important it was that principals have experience as highly effective teachers so that the coaching provided has the greatest possible credibility and impact

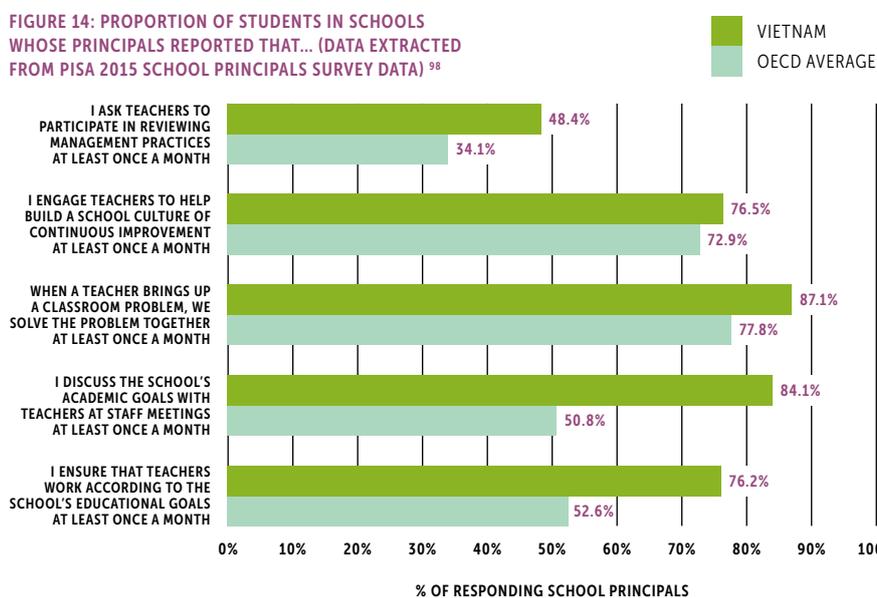
improve their own capacity if the principals are competent and convincing. Otherwise they will not listen and do things their own way (Binh Dinh primary school teacher).

The 2017 Young Lives study of the experience of Grade 10 students in Vietnam provides additional information about the background of school principals and reinforces the idea that school principals often have a reputation prior to appointment as effective classroom practitioners. The great majority of the principals in the study had previously been awarded the status of ‘excellent teacher’.⁹⁵

The PISA 2015 survey of principals’ views also sheds some interesting light on leadership practice in Vietnam compared with in other countries. In almost every question about leadership Vietnamese principals’ responses indicate an assumption of the desirability of leadership that is preoccupied with academic outcomes and pedagogical practice – although, of course, a survey such as this does not demonstrate the reality of practice.

Vietnamese principals were much more likely than the average across OECD countries to state that they regularly discussed the school’s academic goals at least once a month at staff meetings (Vietnamese result 84.1%; OECD average 50.8%).⁹⁶ Similarly, Vietnamese principals were much more likely to claim they emphasised with teachers the school’s educational goals on a regular basis. Vietnamese principals were also much more likely to engage teachers in at least monthly review of management practices (Vietnamese result 48.4%; OECD average 34.1%).⁹⁷

Vietnamese principals were much more likely than the average across OECD countries to state that they regularly discussed the school’s academic goals at least once a month at staff meetings



⁹⁵ Iyer, Azubuike and Rolleston (2017) ⁹⁶ OECD (2016b, 327–331) ⁹⁷ OECD (2016b, 327–331) ⁹⁸ OECD (2016b, 327–331)

Confident theorising about pedagogy

The principals we interviewed spoke confidently both about ideal teaching styles and the characteristics of highly effective teachers.

We asked principals about the model of pedagogy promoted at their school. The following response is interesting because it shows the principal claiming teachers should use a repertory of methods.

A variety of teaching methods should be used such as whole-class teaching, group teaching and individualised teaching in a flexible and mutually supportive fashion. Each teaching method and approach has its own merits and demerits. It is for this reason that the use of diverse teaching methods and approaches throughout the entire teaching process is so important in determining the quality of teaching and learning experiences (Ha Giang secondary school principal).

We also asked principals how they might recognise an excellent teacher.⁹⁹ Again, the responses were multi-faceted. The three responses in Box 6 are all different but each demonstrates assumptions about a matrix of skills and dispositions needed by a highly effective professional.

The principals we interviewed spoke confidently both about ideal teaching styles and the characteristics of highly effective teachers

BOX 6: PRINCIPALS' COMMENTS ON THE CHARACTERISTICS OF EXCELLENT TEACHERS

Response 1

- Have a strong command of knowledge and understanding of the subject taught and apply, in a flexible manner, teaching methods in line with different types of students
- Show enthusiasm, dedication, passion, compassion and love for teaching profession; know how to inspire students in the course of teaching

Response 2

- Show strong passion and dedication in teaching profession
- Possess solid professional expertise and competency
- Actively strive to learn new things and access new teaching methods
- Serve as a continuous lifelong learner
- Serve as a role model for students and others to follow

Response 3

- Have strong love for children; know how to care for and understand characteristics of students
- Exhibit active and fair attitude towards all students
- Of an honest character, rich in imagination, constantly striving to learn new knowledge; show creativity and a strong ability in organising and delivering classes
- Know how to help students become fond of learning, encourage students to think creatively; know how to properly address learning needs of students and not just deliver the curriculum

⁹⁹This question was asked during our second round of data collection in Hanoi and Ha Giang to a total of 12 school principals (two from each level of schooling in each province)

In addition to asking about the qualities of excellent teachers, we asked school principals in Hanoi and Ha Giang what qualities they believed excellent school principals needed to possess. All school principals mentioned a combination of strong moral or ethical standing and leadership skills. They also emphasised the importance of strong teaching and pedagogical skills. A key component of being an excellent school principal, they claimed, lay in understanding what was required to be an excellent teacher. Principals must be able to lead by example and need to understand what pedagogical excellence looks like.

BOX 7: PRINCIPALS' COMMENTS ON THE CHARACTERISTICS OF EXCELLENT PRINCIPALS

- *Must have been an excellent teacher in terms of professional expertise and pedagogical skills* (Ha Giang lower secondary school principal)
- *Possess good pedagogical competencies and skills, clearly showing and playing the leading role of delivering educational activities* (Hanoi primary school principal)
- *Have a superb professional and pedagogical knowledge and understanding* (Hanoi upper secondary school principal Hanoi)

Limited autonomy and close supervision

Principals have substantial in-school power in Vietnamese schools but there are distinct limits to their autonomy and decision-making. Above all they must report on a regular basis to higher authorities outside the school. In key areas of staff appointment and financial planning their powers are very limited. The role of the school principal is a key component of the high accountability system in Vietnam, as explored in Chapter 5.

These limits to autonomy, and the extent to which principals are directed by others outside the school, contrast sharply with some aspects of 'western' school leadership. Some of our Vietnamese witnesses were aware of this difference between 'western' and Vietnamese practice.

I once visited a school in Canada where our grandchild was studying and the power the head teacher has is very big. So, for example, he was given a lump sum of budget based on the number of students in the whole school he has so that he can, you know, move money around [as he thinks fit]. So, for example, if he has fewer teachers but he increases the number of contact hours between students and teachers then he can make the ends meet. So what I'm saying is he has lots of power to manoeuvre within the budget he has been given... but it's not possible to do so here in Vietnam (education expert, general education).

The action of principals in Vietnam is subject to tight external control. There are two major forms of oversight, via BOET or DOET for technical educational matters and via the local agencies of the Communist Party on general matters. In addition, the Parent Board has, at least in theory, powers that further circumscribe the work of the principal.¹⁰⁰

Principals have substantial in-school power in Vietnamese schools but there are distinct limits to their autonomy and decision-making

¹⁰⁰ For a more detailed description of the role of the Parent Board, please see Chapter 8



We asked school principals about important external agencies that had had an impact on the life of the school. It seems that BOET or DOET looms large in the life of the principal. School leaders described how they were summoned to regular monthly meetings at which they had to report on progress and received further directions. BOET or DOET also regularly visit the schools to monitor activities and sometimes organise formal whole-school inspections. One of our interviewees was just about to be subject to a full inspection.

Principal: *We are directly supervised by DOET.*

Interviewer: *Do they supervise you often?*

Principal: *It happens often.*

Interviewer: *What is it like?*

Principal: *Every month I have to report to DOET. They send inspectors to attend the classes during teaching hours and also inspect the school's management. For example, right next week, DOET will inspect our school in all aspects... It is a comprehensive inspection. We have to report on all the school's activities, for example managing teachers, managing students, financial management, health care and equipment management, and the inspectors will sit in the classrooms during teaching hours.*

School leaders described how they were summoned to regular monthly meetings at which they had to report on progress and received further directions

In parallel with this close monitoring by BOET or MOET, there is local political oversight of the work of principals through the District People's Committee and the school's own political Board, which has representatives of the Communist Party as members. One Hanoi principal described BOET as an important source of professional guidance but identified the District People's Committee of the Communist Party as even more powerful, as *'the overarching body in charge of comprehensive oversight and checks of school performance'*. Political influence operates within the school through the operation of the political Board, whose members are drawn from the Communist Party. Another principal described to us how *'the head teacher is controlled by superiors such as the Board of People's Inspection in the school'*.

An expert that we interviewed from VNIES also emphasised the significance of the political authority of the local People's Committee.

The District People's Committee assesses performance through a lens of state management, which has implications for the performance of principals or managers in general in relation to Party-related issues, especially when most principals are secretaries of the school Party cell as a concurrent role... The appointment power is the most important factor. In this case, the District People's Committee has the power to appoint principals and such other managers (education expert, general education).

One expert witness illustrated the limited nature of school-based decision-making with reference to recruitment. Principals do not recruit staff. They submit manpower requests to BOET or DOET and ultimately the District People's Committee authorises recruitment and organises the selection process.

The principal is not allowed to recruit teachers directly; he leads the process of staff manpower planning together with the staff members within school. So, for example, at the beginning of the year the principal may convene a meeting saying,

okay, we need this teacher for music, and those proposals will be submitted to, in the case of primary schools, to BOET and BOET will consolidate the plans and submit the overall plan to the District People’s Committee. The District People’s Committee will organise the competition to recruit and select teachers and they will send the selected teachers to schools (education expert, K-12).

PISA evidence on autonomy and principals’ decision-making authority

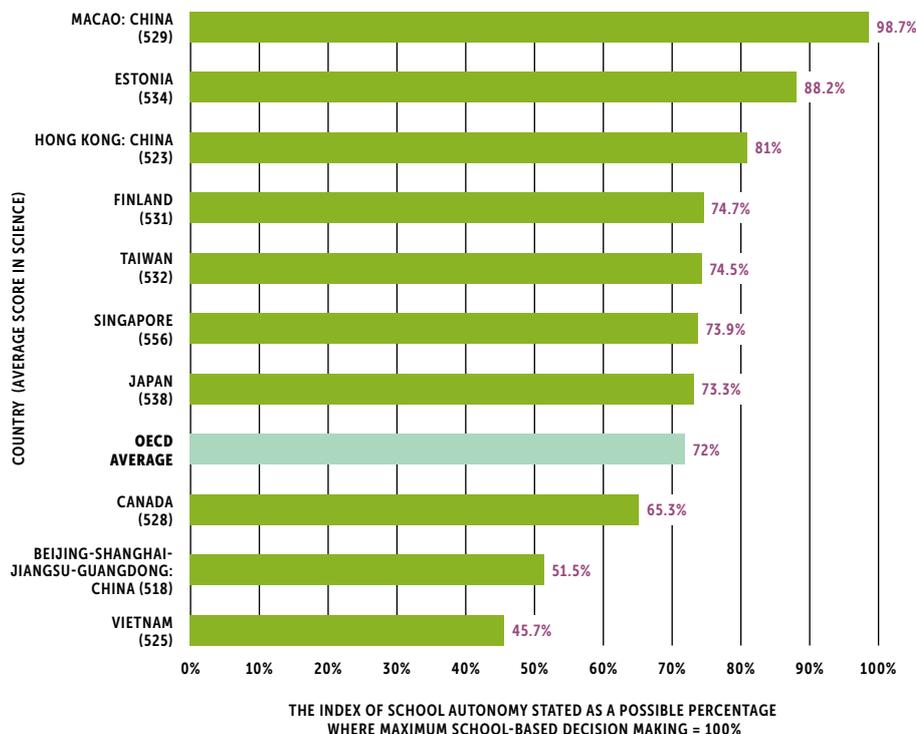
The PISA 2015 principals’ survey sought to ascertain the differing levels of autonomy principals have worldwide. Principals in all participating countries were asked a series of questions about school-level decision-making power. The questions explored how far principals were empowered to make important decisions related to resources, such as selecting teachers for hire; firing teachers for underperformance; establishing teachers’ starting salaries; determining teachers’ salary increases; and formulating the school budget. Vietnamese principals have less authority in these areas than their peers in many other countries.

The PISA analysts converted the overall responses to questions on decision-making into a single score, on what they called an ‘index of school autonomy’, expressed as a percentage, where 100% represents the maximum possible level of decentralised school-level decision-making. The Vietnamese score was 45.7%, well below the average for OECD countries of 71.3%.¹⁰¹

It is interesting to compare the Vietnamese index of school autonomy with the scores for other countries where students did well in science in 2015. Vietnam has the lowest autonomy rating among the ‘top 10’ science jurisdictions, although the figure is similar to the mainland China metropolitan areas (Beijing, Shanghai, Jiangsu and Guangdong).

The PISA 2015 principals’ survey sought to ascertain the differing levels of autonomy principals have worldwide

FIGURE 15: INDEX OF SCHOOL AUTONOMY IN PISA 2015 ¹⁰²



¹⁰¹ OECD (2016b, 337) ¹⁰² OECD (2016b, 337)

School principal experience, training and motivation to becoming a principal

School principals are usually highly experienced teachers. Those we interviewed had between 10 and 35 years of teaching experience. Many principals also indicated that they had held management or chair of Trade Union branch positions prior to becoming school principals.

I have worked at this school since August 1994, in 2008 I was promoted to be the vice principal of Phuong Do Lower Secondary School and in 2012 I became the principal. Before, I was a teacher, subject head and Union president (Ha Giang lower secondary school principal).

I have taught literature since 1981, I was head of literature and chair of the Union (Binh Dinh lower secondary school principal).

I taught here as soon as I graduated in 2004, about 12 years now, I taught here for 10 years, then started management positions two years ago (Binh Dinh lower secondary school principal).

I was a teacher for 18 years and vice principal for 11 years before becoming principal (Binh Dinh primary school principal).

I was previously a mathematics teacher here. After I earned my Masters degree (in mathematics) I was assigned to the post of deputy manager at DOET. In 2004 I became manager and then was made vice principal in 2010 (Ha Giang lower secondary school vice principal).

All but one principal had received management training prior to becoming principal. The one school principal who had not received training had recently taken on the role as a result of unforeseen circumstances, and he made a point of stating that this was not the norm.

I was trained as a literature teacher, then attended education management classes at Giap Bat, courses in politics, IT and ethnic minority languages, the SREM [Support to the Renovation of Education Management project] course for managers,¹⁰³ classes in effective management for school principals at the Pedagogical University and training on textbook changes (Ha Giang secondary school principal).

I attended training on educational management at the Hanoi Pedagogy School and graduated from there (Binh Dinh secondary school principal).

My major at Hanoi National University of Education was mathematics teaching, then I obtained the Certificate for Management and completed a political theory intermediate class. Such qualifications helped me undertake this role (Ha Giang secondary school principal).

The principals we interviewed were not well paid compared with other teachers. We asked principals in Ha Giang and Hanoi about their pay. They described their monthly pay in late 2017 as ranging between 8 million and 11 million VND. This is no more than the pay of experienced teachers. They told us they were not paid more than their most experienced subordinates and were sometimes paid less.

Becoming a school principal was never described as a planned career move. Rather, it was considered an honourable responsibility that came as a surprise

Becoming a school principal was never described as a planned career move

¹⁰³ SREM was sponsored by the European Commission, in association with Cambridge Education, to support institutional capacity-building and the renovation of education management in Vietnam. See www.gopa.de/en/projects/support-renovation-education-management-srem-project

and they then accepted. Once in post, all school principals spoke of wanting to bring about positive change.

I didn't think I'd become one, I enjoyed teaching, but I agreed to take this position because I was trusted. I went to this school for seven years, and taught here 35 years. I have two more years until retirement, so I want to contribute the best way I can to the school (Ha Giang secondary school principal).

In fact, I only knew how to do a good professional job and did not intend to do management work before, so right after being a manager I had to go to school management classes in Hanoi (Ha Giang upper secondary school principal).

I want to persuade people and build a strong team. Together we develop the school and make it sustainable. I always have for myself a clear vision of how to build the school and improve the facilities as well as educational activities (Binh Dinh primary school principal).

While teaching I felt very passionate about improving the quality, now at management level I still want to be able to do that (Binh Dinh secondary school vice principal).

My biggest motivation... is that [locality name] is one of the poorest communes in Ha Giang province. Thus I understand the struggle of the students here, and work hard and try to achieve the accomplishments needed to deserve being the principal. That is my biggest motivation (Ha Giang lower secondary school principal).

I became a principal because of local requirements. I was not born to be a principal (Hanoi upper secondary school principal).

It's the needs of the school. I never thought of becoming a manager myself. Because I started as a teacher and I just followed that path (Ha Giang lower secondary vice principal).

First of all I must confess that I never thought to become a principal... It just happened. Like what would come, would come. And then it was my turn to be the principal (Hanoi lower secondary school principal).

Learning from other leaders

All school principals spoke of the importance of collaborative working at different levels of the system, and they considered collaboration to be important to them as school leaders. It is often difficult to distinguish between formal and informal means of collaboration among school principals, as principals spoke of forming informal relationships with other school principals through official connections.

The private relationship is more effective. For example if someone needs me I am willing to help. And in return if I need help they will be willing to help me (Hanoi lower secondary school principal).

There's a lot of sharing experiences, for example during yearly meetings and reports at the end of the year. We also discuss with colleagues of same positions. There is not much [formal] collaboration, but there's a lot of advice-giving practice (Binh Dinh lower secondary school principal).

All school principals spoke of the importance of collaborative working at different levels of the system, and they considered collaboration to be important to them as school leaders

We learn from each other often, one-to-one or through meetings and conferences. Regarding the upper secondary schools in the city, every year we meet in arts and sports events, each school takes turn to host the events. This has been going on for more than 10 years now (Binh Dinh upper secondary vice principal).

In my opinion, in our work, including our own vice principal and principal, in all the relationships with other schools we exchange management experiences to learn from each other. In particular, we learn from similar districts and schools because each school has its different activities and strengths. For example this area is your strength while other areas are another's interest, so we have to identify them and learn from each other (Ha Giang secondary school principal).

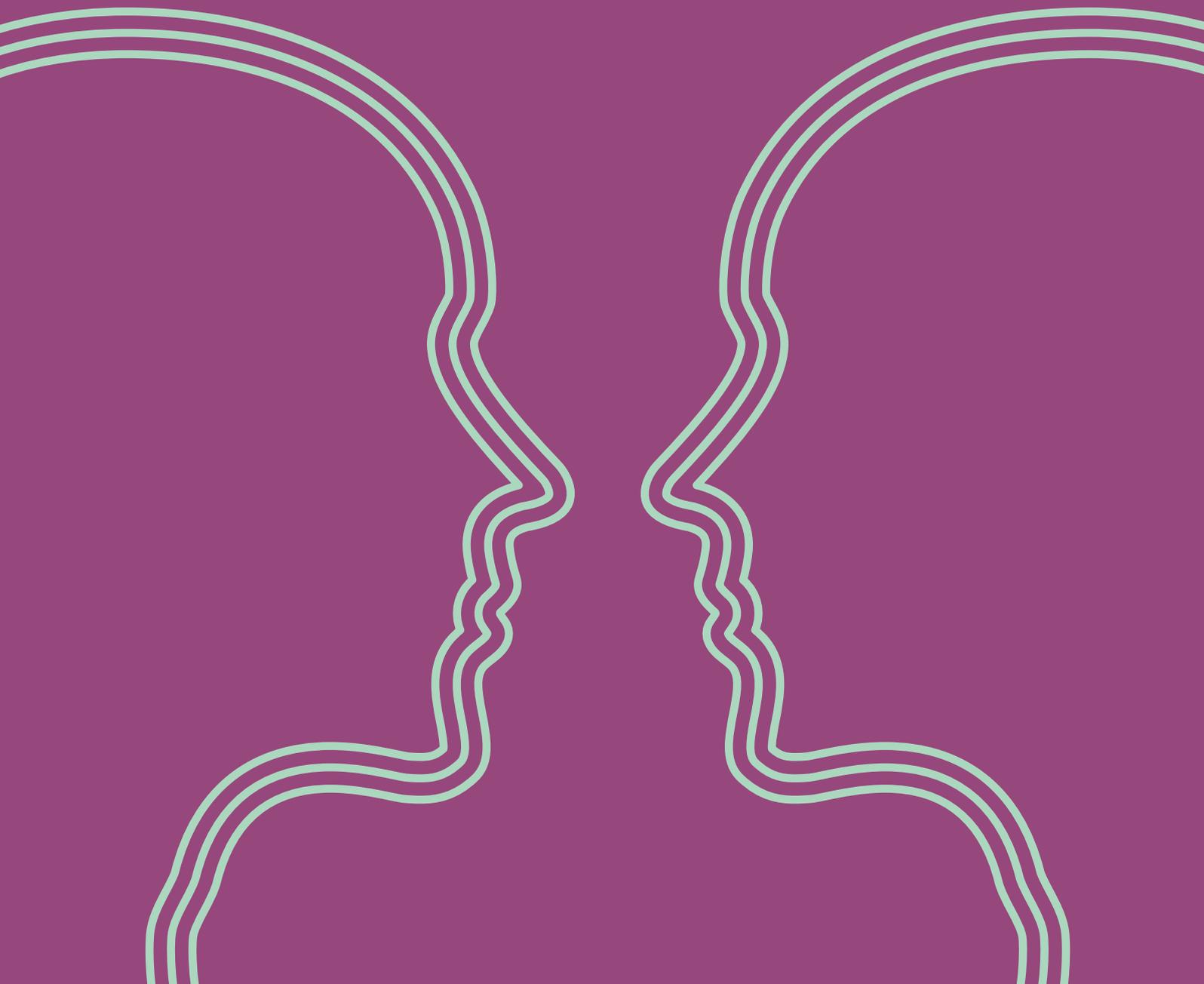
We learn from each other, share experiences through meetings, phone calls, exchange of management experiences or discussion about policies that we are concerned about (Binh Dinh primary school principal).

I participate in the Hanoi Headteachers' Club. We meet one to two times a year when there is news or new school models. For example last year the Club organised a visit to the farm of Nguyen Binh Khiem School. In ways like this we can see how innovative models work for some schools (Hanoi upper secondary school principal).

We hold meetings for 11 school managers to share experiences and help each other. There is a monthly meeting among 11 schools plus one guest school to discuss topics relating to teaching. The 12 schools divide into three groups and, for example, discuss topics regarding the VNEN model. Schools take turn to host the meetings (Ha Giang primary school principal).

Chapter 8

Parental partnership



The principals we interviewed considered that effective parental engagement was a strength of their schools.

We identify three dimensions regarding the relationship between parents and schools:

- Parents express high levels of satisfaction with the school system.
- There is evidence of effective parental partnership in some schools.
- Parents are expected to make additional contributions to school costs through the policy of socialisation.

This chapter draws on data from our qualitative fieldwork in Ha Giang, Hanoi and Binh Dinh, in addition to our survey conducted by Ipsos. It also includes further analysis of PISA 2012 and 2015 school principal and student survey data. While a broadly positive picture emerged from our fieldwork, our expert witnesses were keen to urge caution about generalisation.

Parents were broadly positive about the schools and the extent to which these were responsive to their concerns

Reports of high levels of satisfaction

We spoke to many teachers, principals, university staff and government officials in four provinces. These expert witnesses considered that there was generally a good relationship between schools and parents. Data from the 2012 and 2015 PISA surveys also presented a positive picture of partnership between schools and parents in Vietnam.

We worked with Ipsos Vietnam to undertake a survey of parental attitudes in four provinces. We asked 350 parents what they thought about their children's schools. The parents were broadly positive about the schools and the extent to which these were responsive to their concerns.

TABLE 13: SAMPLE OF PARENTS PARTICIPATING IN SURVEY

| Province | No. of participating parents | Percentage of sample |
|------------------|------------------------------|----------------------|
| Ho Chi Minh City | 100 | 29% |
| Hanoi | 100 | 29% |
| Ha Giang | 75 | 21% |
| Binh Dinh | 75 | 21% |

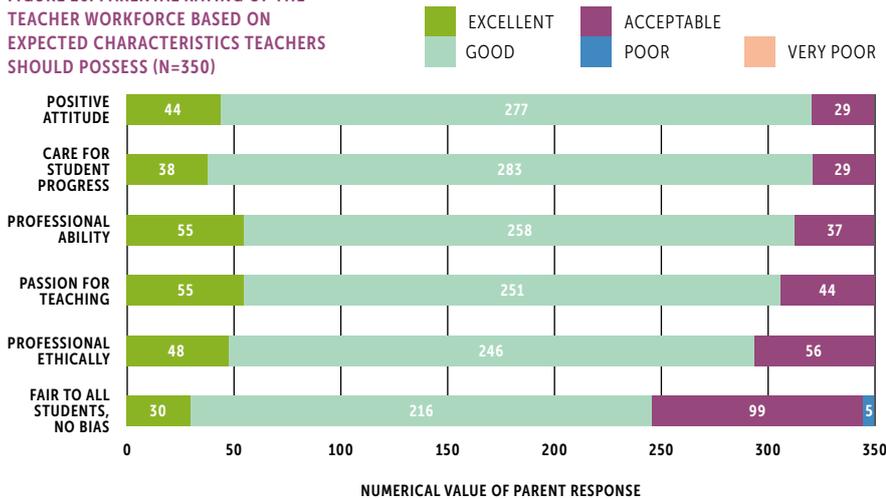
Ipsos identified 350 parents who were prepared to take part in a confidential survey. Of these, 95% sent their children to government schools and 5% sent them to different forms of private school. Caution is needed with the results of this survey. Overall the Ipsos parent group was probably significantly more economically

advantaged than the general population: 63% of the parents had themselves completed upper secondary education or above and only 4% identified themselves as being from an ethnic minority. Only 5% reported that their children were exempt from school fees. With this caveat about representativeness in mind, the survey provides some interesting and largely positive insights into the views of parents.

Parents, broadly speaking, respected the skills and professionalism of the teacher workforce. Virtually no parents had serious concerns about the aptitude and attitudes of Vietnamese school teachers.

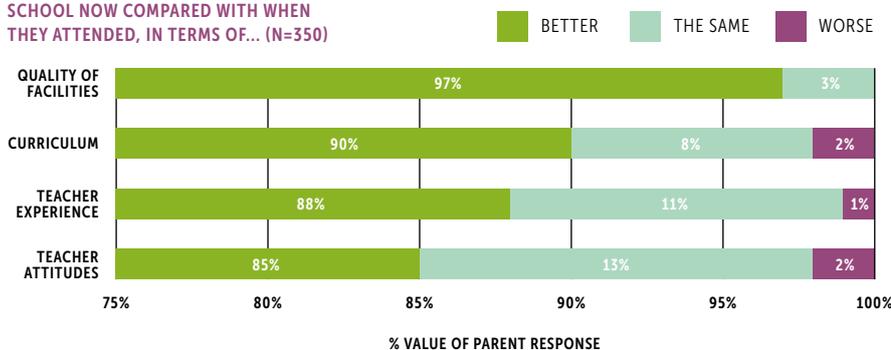
Parents, broadly speaking, respected the skills and professionalism of the teacher workforce

FIGURE 16: PARENTAL RATING OF THE TEACHER WORKFORCE BASED ON EXPECTED CHARACTERISTICS TEACHERS SHOULD POSSESS (N=350)



The Ipsos parent group was overall happy with current teacher quality. Parents were also of the view that, in a range of important ways, schools had got better since they themselves were children. Agreement was the most marked agreement with regard to school facilities. There was also a strong majority view that improvements had also been made, since their own time as school students, in terms of the curriculum, teacher attitudes and teacher experience.

FIGURE 17: PARENTAL PERCEPTIONS OF SCHOOL NOW COMPARED WITH WHEN THEY ATTENDED, IN TERMS OF... (N=350)



There is evidence of effective parental partnership in some schools

Our findings are consistent with the idea that one of the strengths of the Vietnamese school system is the responsiveness of the schools to parental concerns and a commitment to building a coalition between parents and school staff. Our witnesses told us that parental partnership was a key component of school effectiveness. One principal from Ho Chi Minh City was clear that parental 'buy-in' to the work of the school was an essential precondition for success:

Our experience is that if we want to do any activity successfully and effectively the first step is to gain agreement and support from parents. There must be active and harmonious cooperation between school and parents in carrying educational activities (Ho Chi Minh City principal).

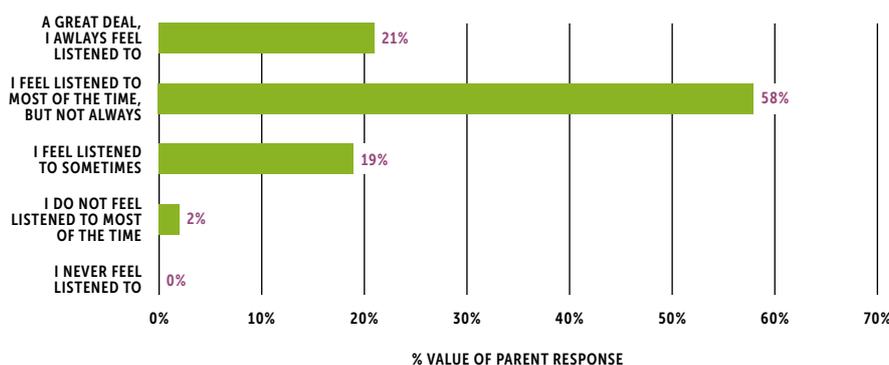
Teachers and principals told us about the practical steps they had taken to invite parental feedback:

We collect their opinions by publicising the managers' phone number; parents can call or send a text directly, or give their voice through the Parent Committee, or any other channels are accepted (Ha Giang lower secondary school principal).

When we asked parents whether they felt listened to by their children's schools, the result was broadly positive: 79% of parents stated that they felt listened to 'always' or 'most of the time'. Not a single parent agreed with the statement *I never feel listened to*.

Not a single parent agreed with the statement *I never feel listened to*

FIGURE 18: HOW FAR DO YOU FEEL THE SCHOOL LISTENS AND RESPONDS TO YOU? (N=350)

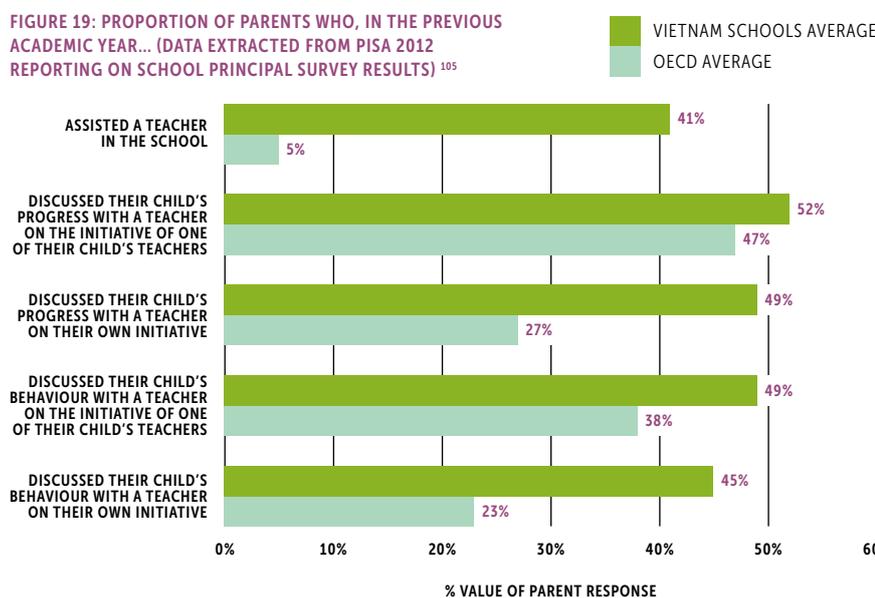


These findings are consistent with evidence from PISA. According to school principals in the PISA 2012 survey, Vietnamese parents had, in international comparative terms, an extremely high level of interaction with schools. This engagement included both informal discussion about individual children and their progress and formal 'governance' arrangements for the management of the school.

According to the 2012 PISA data *parent-initiated* conversations about either the behaviour or the academic progress of students are markedly more common in Vietnam compared with OECD country averages. In the eyes of principals as reported by the PISA survey, Vietnamese parents felt comfortable taking the lead in ensuring dialogue with the professionals about their children’s behaviour and progress at school.

Vietnamese parents also appear, according to the 2012 PISA survey, to be unusually visible as volunteers in school. Vietnamese principals reported that the percentage of parents who, in the previous academic year, had assisted a teacher in the school was 41%; this was the highest level of reported in-school volunteering of any country that participated in the 2012 PISA survey, and was far above the OECD average of 5%.¹⁰⁴

Vietnamese parents felt comfortable taking the lead in ensuring dialogue with the professionals about their children’s behaviour and progress at school



Unfortunately, the precise questions about parental engagement asked in PISA 2012 were not repeated in the 2015 survey. However, the responses to questions asked in 2015 confirmed that, at least in the eyes of this sample of Vietnamese school principals, parental partnership was strong. Almost all Vietnamese principals in 2015 considered that their schools provided ‘a welcoming and accepting atmosphere for parents to get involved’. A total of 93.7% of Vietnamese students are in schools whose principals consider that *Our school includes parents in school decisions*. This is a particularly high score, well above the average agreement rate from principals in OECD countries of 76.8%.

¹⁰⁴ OECD (2013, 142) ¹⁰⁵ OECD (2013, 142)

BOX 8: PRINCIPAL PERCEPTIONS FROM THE 2015 PISA SURVEY ABOUT PARENTAL ENGAGEMENT IN VIETNAM ¹⁰⁶

- 97.5% of Vietnamese students are in schools whose principals consider that *Our school provides a welcoming and accepting atmosphere for parents to get involved.*
- 95.6% of Vietnamese students are in schools whose principals consider that *Our school designs effective forms of school-to-home and home-to-school communications about school programmes and children's progress.*
- 93.7% of Vietnamese students are in schools whose principals consider that *Our school includes parents in school decisions.*

The government of Vietnam mandates parental partnership as a formal school responsibility. MOET stipulates via decrees that teachers must work closely with individual parents to ensure children do well. The MOET charter for primary schools, for example, describes how the 'homeroom' teacher must engage directly with all parents. The 'homeroom teacher' in a primary school teaches the core subjects and has pastoral and academic oversight of students' progress.

*The homeroom teacher should work closely with the parents of the class:
Reporting on each student's academic performance;
Ensuring a unified plan of support for weak students... ;
[Together with parents] encouraging students to strive for good learning.*¹⁰⁷

While teachers are required by regulations to work together with parents regarding the progress of individual students, schools are also required to consult parents collectively. Unusually in international terms, every single class in a government school must have a Parent Committee that reviews educational activities and partnership between parents and teachers. There should also be a whole school Parent Teacher Committee or Board, with parent members drawn from class-level committees.

Article 46: The parents' committee

1. *Each class has a parents committee organised every school year, comprising members appointed by the parents and guardians of students, to coordinate with the homeroom and subject teachers in the task of student education.*
2. *Each school has a parents committee organised in every school year, comprising members appointed by the class parents committees, to coordinate with the school to carry out educational activities.*¹⁰⁸

The regulations give the Parent Board the power to monitor educational and non-educational quality.

The students' Parent Board participates in checking activities related to teachers' teaching activities, day-boarding activities, quality of meals for children... For example, the students' parents may come to the school's kitchen to check the quality of food and they may attend a class observation to see what teaching methods are applied (Ha Giang primary school principal).

Every single class in a government school must have a Parent Committee that reviews educational activities and partnership between parents and teachers

¹⁰⁶ OECD (2016b, 324) ¹⁰⁷ Circular No. 41/2010/TT-BGDĐT, Article 50.2 ¹⁰⁸ Circular No. 12/2011/TT-BGDĐT, Article 46.1 and 46.2



While the principals we interviewed, such as this one in Ha Giang, seemed keen to explain that their schools complied with these regulations, it is important to note that some of our expert witnesses urged caution and suggested the regulations were not always applied consistently across Vietnam.

In many of our interviews with teachers and school principals, they signalled their understanding of the importance of partnership with parents. Again it is important to remember that these are self-reports by school staff, perhaps keen to portray their schools in the best possible light, and we had no opportunity to verify their claims:

[We have a] close regular relationship. Parents can talk directly and send feedback to the principal. Every Friday the parents or students can meet with the principal or talk to her directly about their concerns (Binh Dinh secondary school vice principal).

[There is a] good relationship with the parents; they trust us and support our policies. We ask for their opinions when building new facilities, they monitor the progress and assess transparency. So they trust us and support us, as long as the contribution amount is reasonable, affordable. We collect their opinions by publicising the managers' phone number, parents can call or send text directly, or give their voice through the Parent Committee, or any other channels are accepted (Ha Giang secondary school teacher).

Several of the teachers we interviewed talked about how the level of parental engagement had increased in recent times.

Parents nowadays think differently about education; in both rural areas and the city, they invest a lot in education, and they collaborate with teachers better (Binh Dinh secondary school teacher).

Parents nowadays care more about their children's learning compared with 10 years ago, as well as their physical health. They're involved actively in teaching and extracurricular activities as well (Binh Dinh primary school principal).

The parents care about their children compared with 10 years ago, probably because they were so poor and had to work so hard with little time left to care about schools. Nowadays they ask more from the teacher, for example if they don't understand something like Decree 30 they come ask the teacher directly (Binh Dinh primary school teacher).

As part of the 2015 PISA commentary OECD analysts aggregated worldwide principals' responses to a series of questions about parental engagement and created an 'index of school efforts to involve parents'. Vietnam achieved a high score on this index, ranking 14th out of 67 participating countries in terms of the reported level of parental engagement.¹⁰⁹

In the 2015 PISA survey Vietnamese principals confirmed there was a strong legal framework for parental partnership. A total of 94.0% of Vietnamese students are in schools whose principals reported there was legislation requiring the involvement of parents in school activities; this compares with an OECD average of 69.8%.¹¹⁰

In the 2015 PISA survey Vietnamese principals confirmed there was a strong legal framework for parental partnership

¹⁰⁹ OECD (2016b, 97) ¹¹⁰ OECD (2016b, 323)

Parents are expected to make additional contributions to school costs through the policy of socialisation

One of the most striking statistics contained within the PISA 2012 survey is the fact that, according to school principals, of all participating countries in PISA, parents in Vietnam were more likely than any others to assist in fundraising for their schools. According to principals, the proportion of Vietnamese parents who had assisted in fundraising for their local school in the previous academic year was 61%. This was by far the highest figure of all countries participating in PISA 2012 and compared with an average for OECD countries of just 10%.

This reference to fundraising is, without doubt, a consequence of the Vietnamese policy of ‘socialisation’. This concept goes back to the great economic policy realignment that took place in Vietnam in the 1980s and 1990s. Under the so-called *doi moi* economic reforms, the role of the government changed and a market economy was encouraged, under the overall guidance of the Communist Party of Vietnam. The government decided there was a need to mobilise additional economic resources beyond those available from taxation. The charging of users of education, health and other social services was permitted under a related policy called *xa hoi hoa*, or socialisation. This was both a means of funding and an expression of the view that local communities, as well as the Vietnamese state, must shoulder the burden involved in ensuring good social services.

Socialisation goes beyond simply charging service users. It involves an invitation to each community to demonstrate commitment to local services through both financial and different forms of in-kind support. A decree passed in 1999 made this clear.

To socialise the activities in education, healthcare, culture and sport is to mobilise and organise the broad participation of the people and the entire society into the development of these activities aimed at step by step raising the level of enjoyment of education, healthcare, culture and sport in the physical and spiritual development of the people.¹¹¹

Some experts have been critical of socialisation, seeing it either as a form of ‘privatisation’ or as an undesirable crisis measure that should not be necessary in today’s more settled and prosperous times. Such critics highlight the risks that socialisation may provide opportunities for corruption or favour economically more privileged communities over disadvantaged communities. They also suggest it may lead to forms of favouritism or discrimination, whereby the children of those parents who do not contribute are discriminated against by their teachers. One of our expert witnesses, for example, told us he was concerned about potential problems of corruption associated with socialisation:

Many schools misappropriate or misuse the funds through what I refer to as over-collection (education expert, general education).

While many experts have expressed their reservations about this policy, the school principals we interviewed were largely positive about the improvements

Parents in Vietnam were more likely than any others to assist in fundraising for their schools

¹¹¹ Resolution No.73/1999/ND-CP

made possible through socialisation. They spoke enthusiastically about the additional resources that had been generated for the improvement of the school environment:

Many parents contribute. This air conditioner for example is from parents' contributions (Binh Dinh lower secondary school principal).

Last year, the parents saw the canteen was in a really hot condition. They decided to install fans for their children (Hanoi lower secondary school principal).

Besides supporting policies from the government, the parents also contribute to socialise education. In the past we lacked beds for boarding students, now we have mobilised contributions from the families to buy the beds, to build a dining room, to set up a water pipe for use at the school. The entire community and the state have collaborated to help the students learn (Ha Giang primary school principal).

Students attending satellite schools are also supported financially and emotionally through socialisation, meaning contributions from other organisations and donations. Last year our primary and secondary school received rice donations for students who aren't eligible for state support, enough rice for one year (Ha Giang primary school principal).

Principals were keen to explain that the Parent Board was at the heart of the governance arrangements for the socialisation fund. One Ha Giang principal explained how, by persuading the Parent Board, it had been possible to generate substantial resources to refresh and expand the stock of the school's computers. Another Ha Giang principal explained how the use of socialisation funds for the improvement of student toilet facilities was undertaken only after an investigation by the Parent Board that confirmed the need for action.

Socialisation is only available via the Parent Board... At the beginning of school year I proposed to the Representative Board of the Parent Board as follows: there are only 18 computers for 1,000 students in our school; if each student supports the school with 1,000 VND we can purchase a system of computers. This is based on voluntary not compulsory contributions. As a result, the Representative Board of the Parent Association mobilised the amount of 94 million VND and the amount was used to purchase computers for the school (Ha Giang secondary school principal).

This year we wanted to repair the toilets for the students, the Parent Association went to survey the structure to see if there was a need for improvement. After that they agreed with the proposal, and we have to account for every item that is repaired (Ha Giang lower secondary school principal).

Perhaps conscious of some public and media criticism that there has been of the misappropriation of funds, teachers and principals emphasised to us that socialisation was managed by the Parent Board, and depended entirely on their formal support and oversight. Our witnesses were keen to describe the careful scrutiny that parents applied to all decisions about socialisation and the way they monitored socialisation-funded projects.

Our witnesses were keen to describe the careful scrutiny that parents applied to all decisions about socialisation and the way they monitored socialisation-funded projects

The Parent Board helps the school explain and disseminate the school's policies to students' parents as well as together with the school participating in management of socialisation... At the end of school year parents and the school together check all the spending and learn lessons for the following year. Parents participate in all stages of socialisation with the school (Ha Giang primary school principal).

We ask for their opinions when building new facilities, they monitor the progress and assess transparency. So they trust us and support us, as long as the contribution amount is reasonable, affordable (Ha Giang, lower secondary school principal).

School principals were keen to emphasise that socialisation priorities were shaped by parental judgements rather than the advice of education professionals.

Some parents knew their children liked playing sport so they proposed to self-equip sporting facilities; for example the Parent Board self-funded and constructed two basketball and volleyball yards (Ha Giang secondary school principal).

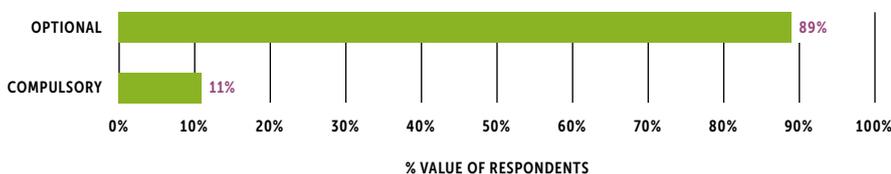
Our socialisation source comes from parents of our students, not business. Parents mainly worry about their children's study conditions. For example, last year we socialised and self-equipped air with conditioning and projectors in classes (Hanoi upper secondary school principal).

School principals were keen to emphasise that socialisation priorities were shaped by parental judgements rather than the advice of education professionals

Using the survey conducted by Ipsos Vietnam in four provinces, we asked 350 parents about socialisation: 81% stated that they made contributions to the school via the policy of socialisation (n=285/350). There was a considerable variation in the amounts paid annually, which ranged from 10,000 to 2,000,000 VND.

A total of 283 parents responded to a question on whether or not they considered that socialisation contributions were compulsory or optional. In law socialisation is entirely voluntary. However, 11% told us that contributions were compulsory. One possible explanation for this is that the schools have made it clear that a contribution is expected and parents do not dare to challenge this for fear their children will be penalised – so the contributions are in effect compulsory.

FIGURE 20: IS IT COMPULSORY OR OPTIONAL TO MAKE SOCIALISATION CONTRIBUTIONS? (N=283)



Most parents in our sample did not object to the policy of socialisation. However, it is not possible to generalise from this because the sample was small and not representative of the country as a whole in terms of geography and the weighting of people from different socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds. Our sample was

overall more privileged than the general population, with fewer people from ethnic minority backgrounds and more parents who had themselves completed upper secondary education.

While it is not possible to generalise from this small survey, the views of these parents are nonetheless interesting. Our survey gave parents a 'free text' opportunity to comment on socialisation. Many explained that they were prepared to make socialisation payments because they wanted the best possible learning environment for children:

I want the school to have enough facilities to improve their teaching so that students get better results (HCMC parent).

The school can create better conditions for students when the socialisation budget is available (Binh Dinh parent).

I hope that schools have better facilities and can put more effort into teaching (Ha Giang parent).

When I contribute I expect that from my contribution the school can improve facilities and teaching quality (Hanoi parent).

While the survey of parental attitudes produced broadly positive responses, there were some dissenting thoughts expressed in the free text comments. Some parents explicitly stated that there was a risk of favouritism; if, as a parent, you contributed via socialisation, might you expect a better deal, and perhaps better results, for your own children? Conversely, if you failed to contribute, would the school penalise your children?

If you participate in the campaign, the teacher will take care of your children more (Ha Giang parent).

Achievement in study depends on the relationship with parents. If parents have a close relationship with teachers, their children will have high results (Binh Dinh parent).

Many explained that they were prepared to make socialisation payments because they wanted the best possible learning environment for children

Chapter 9

Conclusion – Promising practice



In 2013 Jo Boyden, head of the Young Lives research project at Oxford University said: *Pupil performance in Vietnam is truly exceptional. The obvious question is ‘Why?’.*

We have sought to make a contribution to the better understanding of how government schools operate and why many of them are effective. What emerges is not conclusive but constitutes an account of promising practice.

While we have attempted to understand better the internal workings of the Vietnamese school system, we recognise, of course, that the apparent success of the Vietnamese school system also depends upon powerful social factors outside the schools themselves. Many of our witnesses described the prevalent view in Vietnam that educational success could provide a means of escaping from a life of poverty:

In Vietnam everyone believes that we should learn to have a new life and learning is important, especially for the poor. Parents always teach their children when they are small that learning will make their life better in the future (Hanoi upper secondary teacher).

In Vietnam we believe that studying is the only way to overcome poverty, so children from poorer families are more willing and determined to study, and the elderly in the families also invest more and encourage their children to study hard (Binh Dinh primary school teacher).

...Vietnam has experienced a long history of war with very adverse environmental conditions, a lot of typhoons, storms because of the long coastline. Because of this there is a deep mindset in each and every Vietnamese citizen that they want to grow, to overcome the adversity... and the only way for them to do so is through education. That’s why many Vietnamese students in universities have made extraordinary achievements, and are distinguished scholars (education expert, ethnic minority groups).

When we asked teachers to explain the success of Vietnamese students in the PISA tests, they rarely attempted to take the credit as education professionals. Instead, they identified cultural issues- and, in particular, the existence of a strong pro-education culture in Vietnamese society- as a major causal factor. They repeatedly talked about ‘the learning tradition’ at the heart of the Vietnamese view of life:

The first thing is our learning tradition – every family, every person is passionate about study (Binh Dinh, upper secondary vice-principal).

The apparent success of the Vietnamese school system also depends upon powerful social factors outside the schools themselves

[Our successful PISA performance] is because of our determination and will, our learning tradition (Ha Giang primary school teacher).

First, it's about our learning tradition. Vietnamese people are keen to learn and gain more knowledge. In Ha Giang, in recent years, teachers don't have to go to each family to encourage them. The students know that they must study to make progress (Ha Giang lower secondary school teacher).

We recognise the importance of these comments. Our witnesses described the consequences of the 'learning tradition'. They told us that many parents are highly aspirational, encourage their children to respect teachers and work very hard at school. The achievement of Vietnamese students in academic tests is, of course, influenced by such factors.

Of course, it is impossible for other countries to replicate the Vietnamese 'learning tradition'. Every place has its own unique history and culture. However, our investigation also suggested that, in addition to cultural factors, there are distinctive and promising features to the internal working of the school system in Vietnam. Here, there is scope for an important Vietnamese contribution to a global dialogue about school effectiveness.

The story we tell here is consistent with much previous commentary about improving and high performing education systems:

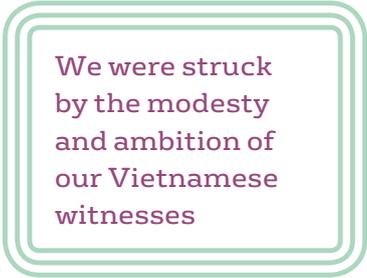
- 1.** Policymakers have a key responsibility to adopt evidence-informed policies and to be consistent and persistent about implementation over the long term, not sapping energy from the system through frequent changes of direction. Implementation in a large school system will benefit from the existence of an effective 'middle tier' which can mediate policy and provide feedback so that, while policies are consistent, detailed implementation can be adaptive in response to the realities of the 'frontline'.
- 2.** Education professionals benefit from a judicious balance of accountability, support and incentives. While there is a role for external accountability, internal accountability systems are also important, including peer review. Parents have a part to play in applying pressure for beneficial change.
- 3.** The quality of the teacher workforce is a key determinant of student outcomes. There is a need to recruit and retain talented people into the teaching workforce. Teachers should be encouraged to use a repertory of pedagogical techniques, recognising the particular power of engaging student feedback.
- 4.** School leadership is another powerful factor, and the best school principals are 'instructional leaders' who are preoccupied with quality at the level of the classroom. Instructional leaders simultaneously provide challenge and support.
- 5.** If schools can harness the power of parental partnership they can greatly enhance the chances of success as measured by learning outcomes. Parental partnership ideally operates on two levels: parents work together with the teachers of their own children and parents are involved in the governance of the school.

Many parents are highly aspirational, encourage their children to respect teachers and work very hard at school

All of these lessons are reinforced by the Vietnamese story and the information provided in this report.

In our interviews we were struck by the modesty and ambition of our Vietnamese witnesses. In their view the job is far from done. While pleased that Vietnamese students seem to be doing comparatively well in some tests, our witnesses were also keen to emphasise the many unresolved problems: not all students have access to a full school day, some students are excluded from upper secondary school, there remains a gap between the outcomes of ethnic majority and minority students, some students are good at passing tests but lack the skills needed for higher study or employment. The modesty and ambition appear closely connected, and derive from an optimistic view of the power of great government schools to transform lives, particularly the lives of disadvantaged children.

The Vietnam story, therefore, appears to us to demonstrate the power of high expectations and a sense of collective efficacy.



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Annex A: Sample for province level fieldwork

Phase 1

| Province | Participant | Method | Number of interviews and focus groups |
|-----------|---------------------------------------|-----------|--|
| Binh Dinh | School principals and vice principals | Interview | 6 |
| | Teachers | FGD | 3 (1 primary, 1 lower secondary and 1 upper secondary. Focus group sizes ranged from 6 to 20 participants) |
| | DOET official | Interview | 1 |
| | BOET official | Interview | 1 |
| Ha Giang | School principals and vice principal | Interview | 6 |
| | Teachers | FGD | 3 (1 primary, 1 lower secondary and 1 upper secondary. Focus group sizes ranged from 6 to 20 participants) |
| | Pedagogical college | FGD | 1 (between 6 and 10 participants per group) |
| | DOET official | Interview | 2 |
| | BOET official | Interview | 1 |
| Hanoi | School principals and vice principal | Interview | 6 |
| | Teachers | FGD | 3 (1 primary, 1 lower secondary and 1 upper secondary. Focus group sizes ranged from 6 to 20 participants) |
| | Pedagogical college | FGD | 1 (between 6 and 10 participants per group) |
| | DOET official | Interview | 1 |
| | BOET official | Interview | 1 |

Phase 2

| Province | Participant | Method | Number of interviews and focus groups |
|----------|-------------------|-----------|--|
| Hanoi | School principals | Interview | 6 |
| | Teachers | FGD | 3 (1 primary school, 1 lower secondary school and 1 upper secondary school. Focus groups sizes ranged from 8 to 15 participants) |
| Ha Giang | School principals | Interview | 6 |
| | Teachers | FGD | 3 (1 at each level of education) |

Total: 47 interviews and focus groups. Focus group sizes ranged from 6 to 20 participants.

Annex B: Policies intended to 'close the gap'

We identified and analysed MOET policies implemented between 2000 and 2017 that have attempted to alleviate disparities between disadvantaged students and their peers through teacher training and targeted deployment to remote and/or disadvantaged areas:

- Joint Circular No. 01/2006/TTLT-BGD&DT-BNV-BTC dated 23 January 2006: This policy gave teachers allowances in the range of 20–30% increases in salary dependent on the level of need in the region in which they worked.
- Decree No. 61/2006/ND-CP dated 6 June 2006: Teachers who work in exceptionally difficult socio-economic conditions have an allowance equivalent to 70% of their current salary.
- Decree No. 134/2006/ND-CP dated 14 November 2006: This policy encourages teachers and school administrators from ethnic minority backgrounds into education.
- Decree No. 54/2011/ND-CP dated 4 July 2011: This policy allows teachers an additional allowance of 1% for each five years of experience.

Each of these policies builds on the previous, and is specifically designed to address the needs in disadvantaged areas at that time.

The second set of policies that have attempted to address disadvantage works on providing allowances directly to students. This includes free meals, a rice allowance, boarding and tuition fee waivers and other exemptions.

- Decision No. 85/2010/QĐ-TTg dated 21 December 2010: This decision encompasses a series of policies supporting semi-boarding students and ethnic minority semi-boarding schools in terms of meals and lodging expenses.
- Decision No. 2123/QĐ-TTg dated 22 November 2010: This created a framework on educational development for ethnic minority groups in the 2010–2015 period.
- Decree No. 49/2010/ND-CP dated 14 May 2010: This policy provided for exemption and reduction of tuition fees, financial support towards learning costs and a mechanism for the collection and utilisation of tuition fees for educational institutions of the national education system from the 2011/12 academic year to the 2014/15 academic year.
- Decision No. 1555/2012/QĐ-TTg: This policy, initiated by the Prime Minister on the National Action Programme for Children 2012–2020 (developed by MOET), developed the Action Plan for Children in the period 2013–2020 with the specific objectives being 'Assist ethnic minority students and those from socio-economically disadvantaged areas in access to schools' and two solutions associated with disadvantaged children requiring support: 1) strengthen support in educational development for disadvantaged areas, ethnic minority regions and child care-givers with disadvantaged backgrounds; and 2) finalise legal documents and policies related to children and child rights, especially for ethnic minority children, children with disabilities and disadvantaged children.
- Decision No. 36/2013/QĐ-TTg dated 24 January 2013: This provides for the provision of a rice allowance to children in disadvantaged areas.
- Decision No. 12/2013/QĐ-TTg: This stipulates policies in support of upper secondary students in exceptionally disadvantaged socio-economic areas. These students are from ethnic minority groups or Kinh students who are from poor households in exceptionally disadvantaged socio-economic communes and villages. Assurances take the form of accommodation and per diem allowances.
- Inter-Ministerial Circular No. 27/2013/TTLT-BGD&DT-BTC dated 16 July 2013: This guides implementation of Decision No. 12/2013/QĐ-TTg of the Prime Minister stipulating policies in support of upper secondary students in exceptionally disadvantaged socio-economic areas. Accordingly, as from 1 September 2013, these students have enjoyed per diem allowances of 40% of the minimum wage.
- Decree No. 20/2014/ND-CP dated 24 March 2014: This decree states that the state shall implement policies to support an exemption from or reduction in tuition fees and subsidise learning cost for those participants/beneficiaries of universal education and illiteracy eradication programmes in accordance with prevailing regulations. This reinforced a previously 'expired' policy.
- Inter-Ministerial Circular No. 20/2014/TTLT-BGD&DT-BTC-BLDTBXH: This provides for exemptions from and reductions in tuition fees and financial support towards learning costs.
- Decision No. 53/2015/QĐ-TTg dated 20 October 2015: This relates to boarding policies for pupils and students, specifying eligibility conditions for boarding among school pupils and students of colleges, including allowances to buy personal belongings, support during the New Year festival and assistance with transportation.

- Decision No. 2123/QĐ-TTg of the Prime Minister dated 1 January 2016: This is on support policies for pupils and students from ethnic minority groups with very few people (specified in Clause 4, Section IV, Article 1).

This list of policies is not exhaustive. What it demonstrates, however, is Vietnam's persistent commitment to increasing enrolment and reducing dropout rates among disadvantaged groups. When a policy expires it is reviewed and replaced with a new one. These policies are then supplemented by additional policies based on the area of need. It is important to note that there is still a gap in educational outcomes between disadvantaged groups and the rest of the school population.

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Education Development Trust Highbridge House, 16–18 Duke Street, Reading, Berkshire RG1 4RU

T +44 (0) 118 902 1000 E enquiries@educationdevelopmenttrust.com W www.educationdevelopmenttrust.com

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