RISE Working Paper 21/062
February 2021

Outlier Vietnam and the Problem of Embeddedness: Contributions to the Political Economy of Learning

Jonathan D. London

Abstract

Recent literature on the political economy of education highlights the role of political settlements, political commitments, and features of public governance in shaping education systems' development and performance around learning. Vietnam's experiences provide fertile ground for the critique and further development of this literature including, especially, its efforts to understand how features of accountability relations shape education systems' performance across time and place. Globally, Vietnam is a contemporary outlier in education, having achieved rapid gains in enrolment and strong learning outcomes at relatively low levels of income. This paper proposes that beyond such felicitous conditions as economic growth and social historical and cultural elements that valorize education, Vietnam's distinctive combination of Leninist political commitments to education and high levels of societal engagement in the education system often works to enhance accountability within the system in ways that contribute to the system's coherence around learning; reflecting the sense and reality that Vietnam is a country in which education is a first national priority. Importantly, these alleged elements exist alongside other features that significantly undermine the system's coherence and performance around learning. These include, among others, the system's incoherent patterns of decentralization, the commercialization and commodification of schooling and learning, and corresponding patterns of systemic inequality. Taken together, these features of education in Vietnam underscore how the coherence of accountability relations that shape learning outcomes are contingent on the manner in which national and local systems are embedded within their broader social environments while also raising intriguing ideas for efforts to understand the conditions under which education systems' performance with respect to learning can be promoted, supported, and sustained.

UKaid from the British people
Australian Aid
Bill & Melinda Gates foundation
Oxford Policy Management
Blavatnik School of Government
University of Oxford

Outlier Vietnam and the Problem of Embeddedness: Contributions to the Political Economy of Learning

Jonathan D. London
Leiden University

This is one of a series of working papers from "RISE"—the large-scale education systems research programme supported by funding from the United Kingdom's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), the Australian Government's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. The Programme is managed and implemented through a partnership between Oxford Policy Management and the Blavatnik School of Government at the University of Oxford.

Please cite this paper as:
London, J. 2021. Outlier Vietnam and the Problem of Embeddedness: Contributions to the Political Economy of Learning. RISE Working Paper Series. 21/062. https://doi.org/10.35489/BSG-RISE-WP_2021/062

Recent literature on the political economy of education and learning explores how political settlements, political commitments, and features of public governance shape education systems' development and performance around learning, particularly in low and lower-middle income countries. Among low and lower-middle income countries Vietnam is a contemporary outlier, having achieved both rapid expansions in enrolment *and* results on international assessments of learning that surpass all countries in its income group and compares favorably with many wealthy countries. As one observer put it, Vietnam's performance "shows that high education quality is possible even with lower income levels, and appears to reveal revolutionary possibilities."[1] In the context of global efforts to improve education systems' performance around learning, Vietnam's performance raises questions about which properties of the country, its politics, and its public governance account for its strong record of achievement in education and what insights, if any, the country's experiences might offer for efforts aimed at promoting improvements in the performance of education systems around learning worldwide.

Given its outstanding performance, its location in East Asia, and its Leninist political system, there is a tendency to assume that Vietnam's performance owes to context specific features and hence can offer few insights into broader efforts at improving systems of education. Factors cited in accounts of Vietnam's successes rightly include Vietnam's government's prioritization of education and well-elaborated education policies, continuously increasing public and private education spending, and the professionalism of Vietnam's education workforce. Analysts have also pointed to the generalized benefits of Vietnam's rapidly expanding economy, which both permitted and incentivized spending on education. Finally, as with other East Asian countries, Vietnam's Confucian heritage is widely cited as having been broadly favorable to education and learning. By contrast, this paper will suggest the deep determinants of Vietnam's

[1] Maryam Akmal. "Vietnam's exceptional learning success: can we do that too?" 2017.

achievements in education reflect a more interesting and complex combination of factors and raise questions of importance for education systems in Vietnam and beyond.

International research on improving systems of education suggests that the performance of education systems around learning stems not only or even mainly proximate determinants of learning (e.g. the presence of schools, teachers) or even their broad social context (e.g. levels of finance) but from the manner in which educations systems are embedded in and entangled with social relational, institutional, and normative features of their social environment. This paper seeks to contribute a demonstration of how and why this is the case and its implications for efforts at improving the coherence of education systems in Vietnam and other settings.

Specifically, this paper develops three sets of arguments. First, it contends that the recent history of education in Vietnam reflects political and societal commitments to education and learning that are both extraordinary and worthy of study and that these both reflect elements specific to Vietnam and are germane to efforts at improving education systems' performance worldwide. Specifically it proposes that, among the many factors that have contributed to Vietnam's successes in promoting education and learning, some of the most important if least understood have to do with: (1) features of the Communist Party of Vietnam's political commitment to education, (2) the manner in which this political commitment is reflected in processes of the party-state's public governance, (3) the dynamics of households' relations to the education system in the context of economic growth and Vietnam's transition from a centrally-planned to more market-based economy and, (4) the emergence of a vibrant public sphere in the institutional field of education that reflects tensions and contradictions between formal policies couched in solidaristic socialist ideals and the system's actual and often highly commodified and sometimes corrupt operation. As a prelude to upcoming research, I consider whether, how, why, and under what conditions these features of Vietnam's education system and their societal embeddedness enhance the accountability of stakeholder relations in ways that reinforce national and local political actors and institutions' accountability to policy goals as well as schools'

accountability to the children, households, and communities they are meant to serve. And to explore when, how, and why such system coherence does or does not materialize.

Second, contributing to critique of theoretical literature on the political economy of learning (hereafter PEL) and to literature on Vietnam, this essay argues that frequently and for understandable reasons, the PEL literature is excessively voluntarist in its perspective. As this paper will suggest, Vietnam's experiences are more complex than a combination of "correct" policies and felicitous and apparently context-specific conditions. Indeed, while many features of Vietnam's education system have the effect of supporting desirable education and learning outcomes these in practice are the product of complex and often contradictory processes of institutional change rather than top-down institutional processes and designs. Numerous aspects of Vietnam's education system that appear to support its coherence for learning are countervailed by features of social relations, institutions, and practices that undermine the promotion of learning, suggesting that Vietnam's education system can perform better still.

In particular, three aspects of Vietnam's education system stand in tension with efforts to improve the performance of the country's education system. These include features of political and administrative decentralization that at times support and at other times harms the achievement of national policy goals, aforementioned features of social inequality that increasingly threaten the accessibility of quality education for all, and features of politics and management relations that at times support and at others frustrate the uptake of measures identified as crucial for addressing the education system's historic shortcomings in imparting cognitive and non-cognitive skills deemed necessary to support further advances and the dynamism, prosperity, and sustainability of Vietnam's economy moving forward. The paper contends that Vietnam poses opportunities to explore how the embeddedness of education systems in political settlements, systems of public governance, and broader social environments can be more thickly understood (Geertz 1973, and also Henstridge et. al.).

The third set of claims is of a more programmatic nature, suggesting that a critique of the political economy of education literature focused on the problem of embeddedness can contribute to a deeper understanding of which features of Vietnam's education system, political settlements, features of public governance and what for now I will refer to as "societal buy in" can help to explain Vietnam's performance both nationally and subnationally, and how this can contribute to efforts to promote improvements in education systems in Vietnam and other contexts. In terms of data and methods, the paper draws mainly on stylized account drawing on a mix of primary and secondary sources, including original research by the author and other members of the RISE Vietnam CRT. The ideas put forward in this paper feed into research ongoing within both the Vietnam CRT and the RISE PET-A project, which explores the conditions under which political elites adopt and pursue policies aimed at supporting learning.

OUTLIER VIETNAM

Vietnam's performance in educational and learning have earned it the status of a contemporary outlier, having rapid gains in average years of schooling and impressive scores on international basements of learning at relatively low levels of per capita income. Vietnam's performance has attracted considerable attention in the scholarly and policy literature, as it raises questions about what Vietnam has gotten right, how, and why and what if any lessons the country's experiences might offer for efforts to promote improvements in education systems worldwide. Beyond important questions about what Vietnam got right, how, and why, the case of Vietnam also raises questions about the significance of education outliers and development outliers more broadly. This includes but is not limited to acknowledgement of the intrinsically ephemerality of outliers, the uncertain relation between past and future performance, and the global significance of experiences and effects in education systems whose development is highly context-specific.

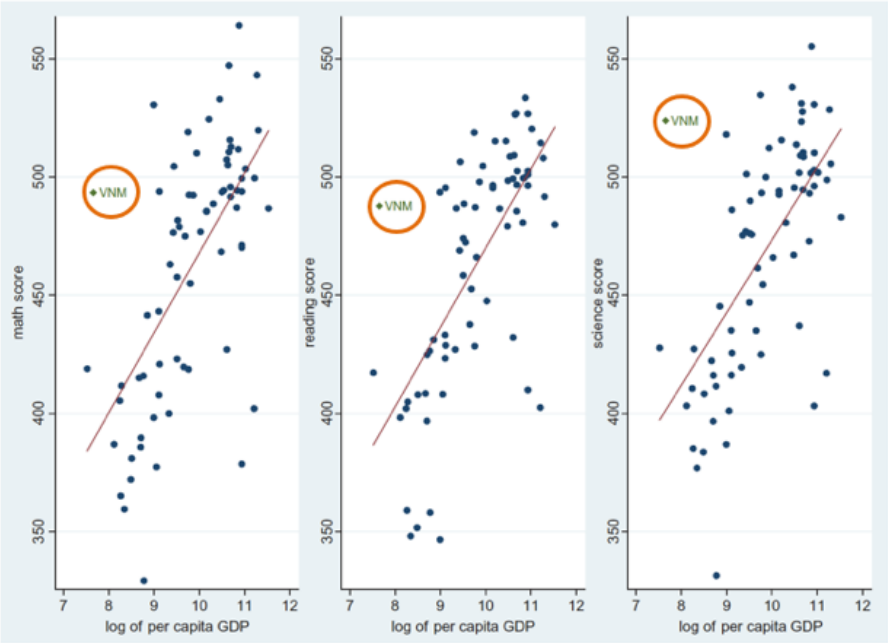
As will be argued below, Vietnam's performance on measures of education and learning – however impressive – do indeed appear to be the result of highly-context specific features of

the country's education system and that system's embeddedness in Vietnam's distinctive and globally embedded market-Leninist order. Further, as Vietnam's income-level rises, its outlier status will diminish and attention will rightly shift to sustaining and improving upon progress to date. Be that as it may, understanding the sources, limits, and even context specific aspects of Vietnam's performance is important for efforts to promote improvements in education systems in Vietnam and beyond. And it may provide insights for efforts to improve education systems worldwide. Among the most important but as yet insufficiently explored have to do with how features of political settlements and public governance have shaped the evolution of Vietnam's education system and, not least, how it is dynamically embedded in Vietnam's social environment more broadly. This is precisely the focus of recent literature on the political economy of education. Before addressing that literature it will be useful to establish key features of outlier Vietnam.

A contemporary outlier

Vietnam's performance in education and learning in comparison to other low- and middle-income countries makes it a contemporary outlier. Vietnam's performance in education in the contemporary context is impressive, particularly in comparison with other countries. The most striking examples are depicted in charts depicting Vietnam and other countries' performance on the 2016 PISA assessments (Figure 1, below).

Figure 1: Vietnam's 2016 PISA Results



Source: Dang and Glewwe 2019

As Figure 1 shows, Vietnam's 2016 PISA scores surpass that of all countries in its income groups and many high-income countries, in math, reading, and science. Owing to the manner in which the assessment was conducted, there are ample grounds to assume Vietnam's 2016 PISA scores present an exaggerated picture of the country's successes in promoting learning.[2] Still, results from other assessments give us confidence that Vietnam does perform better than other countries (see, for example, Rolleston and James 2015), even as the country's 2018 PISA results were not released owing to problems in verifying the results. Beyond these results, Vietnam has registered impressive gains in school enrolment and completed years of schooling. Dang and Glewwe (2017) trace explosive growth in enrolments, including near universal primary and lower-secondary enrolment (by state accounts), a doubling and tripling of net lower- and upper-secondary enrolment between 1992 and 2006), a whopping (and nearly) three-year increase in

[2] https://www.forbes.com/sites/realspin/2017/01/04/are-the-pisa-education-results-rigged/#5e9e0d7c1561

average years of schooling between 1992 and 2014, and PISA test scores in language, math, and science that rival OECD countries, including the US and the UK. Within the ethnic (Kinh) majority population, girls lead boys in enrolment, and academic achievement. While official data on test results, enrolment, and years of schooling are rightly treated with caution, Vietnam's performance is impressive nonetheless.

Internationally, Vietnam's performance has raised questions about its replicability but also excitement about what might be possible in other countries. As Maryam Akmal (2017, 1) observes "[n]o other low-income country performs at the same level or better than developed countries on an international assessment." Vietnam, she continues, "shows that high education quality is possible even with lower income levels, and appears to reveal revolutionary possibilities." There is also, she suggests, a need to place Vietnam's experiences in historical context. This does not diminish Vietnam's achievements but rather trains attention on the conditions under which strong performance occurs and the conditions under which it can be sustained, improved upon, or eroded.

Contemporary outliers and regressions to the mean

In East Asia, Vietnam is hardly the first country to be a contemporary outlier in learning. In the 1950s, Korea was war torn and as poor as India, but its learning outcomes rivaled that observed in wealthier countries. In the early 20th century the Philippines was an outlier in Asia, at least with respect to enrolment and the development of its education system. In 1941, with a population of 17 million, the Philippines counted 12,249 elementary schools (nearly double that of the contemporary Netherlands (population also 17m) with an enrolment of 1.92 million pupils; and increasing to 20,768 elementary schools with an enrolment of 3.96 million pupils by 1950, when its population reached 18.5 million (UNESCO – PEF 1950). As Akmal (ibid) points out, in the 1980s, assessments of science learning in Thailand were reportedly as high as those in the US, a

country with incomes more than 10 times that of Thailand at the time. Among the three countries only Korea has sustained education system performance over time.

Vietnam's historical performance in education is useful for understanding its contemporary status. Despite its centuries-old veneration of learning and scholarship and outlier status (along with China and Korea) in this regard (Woodside 2006), education in Vietnam by the 1950s remained mainly an elite-centred and colonial dominated enterprise that lagged behind other countries in the region. By the 1950s, the small-scale, decentralized, village-based education "system" that had fed the country's "incompletely defeudalized" bureaucracy over centuries was put to the services of training colonial clerks put to the service of French interests (London 2011a, Woodside ibid). From the 1960s through to the 1990s, the performance of education systems in Korea and Vietnam diverged sharply owing no doubt, in part, to war and their lingering effects that set back the development of Vietnam's economy and education system by three decides or more. Under the authority of two different states, northern and southern Vietnam saw rapid expansions in primary enrolment through the 1960s. By the 1970s, war had eviscerated Vietnam's economy and education system. While we lack an historical counterfactual, it is certain that protracted war and prolonged post-war isolation robbed Vietnam of opportunities at achieving Korea-like improvements in its education system, and in higher education in particular.

Other countries cited above remind us not only of the hazards of extrapolating economic and educational trends into the future but also of the ways in which social turmoil sustains and undermines economic and educational performance over time. The Philippines' high hopes for sustained economic growth stalled absent meaningful land reforms and a political settlement best characterized as "an anarchy of families" (McCoy 1993), while its education system's performance has been dampened by excessive privatization, decentralization, and bossism that limited the responsiveness of national and local education systems to large shares of the population (Kusaka 2017). Thai elites may certainly have had reasons to be elated with their

promising (if likely cherry-picked) assessment results— but today neither Thailand nor the Philippines are among Southeast Asia's high performers and both countries have seen slow gains in skilling and labor productivity over time that have likely dampened their prosperity (Lee and Choong 2019). The mixed fortunes of these one-time education outliers raises questions for Vietnam, particularly given noted limitations of Vietnam's growth model and intensifying inequalities. Indeed, while Vietnam's outlier status will diminish as its average incomes increase, the future effectiveness of its education system cannot be assumed.

Specifically, questions arise as to how Vietnam can sustain improvements in learning and to avoid a situation in which complacency with its results it has achieved to date, and regressing toward patterns middling performance and deepening educational inequalities observed in the broad ranks of the world's middle and upper middle-income countries. While Vietnam's education system has performed admirably with respect to expanding enrolments, increasing average years of schooling, and generating eye-catching assessment results, its effectiveness in promoting the types of knowledge, learning, and skills that Vietnamese children need and want remains lacking. To date, Vietnam's middling performance in learning soft and cognitive skills and the development of post-secondary education are recognized as lags on the country's economic performance and threatens to limit its prospects for the medium and long terms (Patrinos et al. 2018). From the perspective of education and learning's contributions to productivity and sustained economic growth, improvements in learning will determine whether Vietnam's future development is on the low-road (e.g. low-hanging fruit such as cheap labor and real estate speculation) or high road (improvements in skills and productivity and movements into higher value-added production and services).

Intensifying inequalities are also a concern. In the past, concerns about equity in the distribution of educational opportunities in Vietnam addressed gaps between rural and urban areas and, to a lesser degree, within urban areas (see, for example, Holsinger 2009). Dang and Glewwe (ibid.), Coxhead and Phan (2019) and other studies show us that educational inequalities

in Vietnam are on the rise, that the country has made slow progress on expanding full-day schooling (especially to poorer segments of the population), that enrolment in upper–secondary education has leveled off and lower-income students are dropping out, and that, ethnic minorities lag far behind across a battery of indicators. As income inequality intensifies, concerns about equity center on the uneven quality of education, access to higher education, and its implications for the productivity of the workforce. More recently, rapid expansion in foreign investment-driven, low-skilled, labor-intensive manufacturing and services has been associated with declining enrollment in upper-secondary education and declining returns to education in some provinces. Additional problems concern the uneven quality of education across regions and, as will be observed below, a decentralized system of state finance that at times supports but at other times appears to undermine the achievement of laudable national development goals around equity and quality education for all. Corruption around academic grades and tests has been an ongoing source of scandal.

Sources of Vietnam's success

To address current and future challenges, it is necessary to understand the sources and limits of Vietnam's impressive achievements. As will be shown, Vietnam's performance on education and learning at low levels of income reflect constellations of factors specific to Vietnam. These include, not least, decades of war and international isolation that effectively kept Vietnam poor, deprived the country's education system of resources, and denied generations of children access to opportunities for education and learning in a country that had venerated learning for centuries and achieved relatively high levels of literacy before war's onset. In the post-war context, Vietnam's bureaucratic capabilities permitted the expansion of schooling at scale, despite the country's poverty.

Vietnam's social history reflects a societal commitment to education forged through centuries of Confucianism (Woodside 1988), anti-imperial and anti-colonial struggle (Woodside

1983), and decades of efforts to promote access to education to all citizens in the course of efforts to develop state socialist economic institutions (London 2011). Both during war and after, Vietnam's state achieved major expansions in schooling, and that this process of expansion continued until the mid-1980s, when Vietnam's planned economy entered its phase of terminal decline (N.N.Q 1989). Up to the present, education policy in Vietnam is conducted with patriotic zeal (Luong D. T. 2014). Families' willingness to commit resources and time into their children's learning is reflected in the large scale flow of household payments into the education system (Viet V.Q. 2006) and, more recently, the estimated US$3 billion dollars Vietnam exported in 2017 for the education of their children overseas (Pham 2018).

On a world scale, intensities of political and societal commitment to education and learning in Vietnam are impressive, if not uncommon in such East Asia (Postiglione and Tan 2007). In Southeast Asia, Vietnam (like Singapore) is distinguished by the presence of a sustained political commitment to promoting education if not, explicitly, to the promotion of gains in learning. The Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) continues to place education at the center of its political agenda and has redistributed resources for education to poorer regions more than states in most other developing countries, including China and Southeast Asia (Malesky and London 2014). Over the last three decades, Vietnam's public investment in education has permitted rapid expansions in enrolment and in average years of schooling nationwide and a narrowing of gaps in enrolment across regions and urban and rural zones. Gaps in enrollment between boys and girls in secondary education have been eliminated. Public spending in education exceeds 5.5 percent of a rapidly expanding GDP, outpacing other countries in the region and in Vietnam's same income group.

The foregoing discussion suggests that Vietnam's successes in education do indeed owe significantly to specific features of its political settlement and public governance. The next section will show how recent literature on the political economy of education and learning provide useful ways of understanding these features. It will also suggest, however, that what is

most interesting about Vietnam's experiences is not its type of political settlement or the formal designs of its system of public governance but rather features of the country's education system's embeddedness in its broader social environment. And that understanding these patterns of embeddedness provides insights into why Vietnam's education system performs well in some respects and not in others while raising more general points relevant to efforts at improving education systems worldwide.

DEVELOPMENTS IN THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF EDUCATION AND LEARNING

Recent developments in theoretical and policy literature on the political economy of education and learning in developing countries pose opportunities for making better sense of Vietnam's experiences and achievements and of the challenges Vietnam faces in promoting improvements in the effectiveness of education systems around learning; asking what features of Vietnam's politics, public governance, and attributes of its education system can help to explain the country's performance on education and learning, what gaps remain, and how these might be addressed. At the same time, an analysis of Vietnam highlights certain limitations of the existing literature and, in particular, its insufficient attentiveness to variable manner in which education systems are embedded in specific national and subnational social and institutional contexts.

This is, in respects, doubly good news; firstly, because recent literature on the political economy of education and learning promises insights into Vietnam's education system that will be of broad interest to those working in Vietnam and beyond; but secondly, because an exploration of Vietnamese experiences poses opportunities to critique and further develop ideas and analytic frames, improving its adequacy for the analysis of education systems in Vietnam and worldwide. In particular, the case of Vietnam invites a sociologically thick analysis of how education systems are embedded in local contexts and its value for developing analyses of what is working in specific education systems with respect to learning, what is not, and why.

From political settlements to the political economy of education and learning

Beyond the broader field of comparative education, recent developments in the political economy of learning trace their development to two related, relatively new, and more general sets of literature. These include the literature on effective states (see, especially, Levy and Walton 2013; but also Hickey and King 2016; Hickey and Lavers 2016; Evans, Huber, and Stephens 2017; Evans and Heller 2018, among others), which in different ways addresses the *conditions under which* states can be effective in promoting desired policy outcomes elites become are committed to and states more or less effective in promoting various sorts of desired development and policy outcomes, and the literature on political settlements, which addresses the relation between properties of politics and institutions and their bearing on development outcomes (Khan 2000, 2010, 2017; North, Wallis, and Weingast 2009, 2013, 2014; Gray 2016). The (new) PEL literature extends insights from the literature on effective states and political settlements to the analysis of education systems taking into account key features of education and the education policy domain including, for example, education's multifunctional character, it's "implementation intensive" features and the challenges this faces for governance.

The politics and public governance of education

In a series of RISE working papers, RISE team members have developed a well-elaborated framework for the analysis of education systems' coherence for learning. Outside of RISE, Brian Levy's landmark study of basic education in South Africa and Sam Hickey and Naomi Hossain's edited volume on the politics of education in developing countries develop analytic frameworks that both complement and stand in productive tension with research being undertaken in RISE. Within the rapidly expanding literature on the political economy of education and learning, this paper is particularly interested in engaging recent work by Brian Levy and his collaborators (Levy

et al. 2018), Sam Hickey and Naomi Hossain and their co-authors (Hickey and Hossain e2019), and provocative responses to these works by Lant Pritchett (2018, 2019a, 2019b).[3]

Building on earlier studies of development and state effectiveness (referenced above), books by Levy, Hickey, Hossain, and their collaborators have advanced the political economy of learning by elaborating conceptually rich and analytically powerful frameworks and extending these to in-depth analyses in a variety of settings. At a general level, the political economy learning is interested in the manner in which politics or political economy conditions the development of education systems and the selection, conduct, and outcomes of education policies. As Hickey and Hossain (2019, 13) point out, to be adequate, a political economy of learning must shed light on

- Material aspects of a country's political economy and how they shape the interests and capacity of different groups to make and pursue demands;
- Features of formal and informal institutions and the influence on politics and operational features of education policy domains;
- Particular forms of political agency (e.g. leadership, coalitions) that prevail;
- Attributes of governance arrangements within the state and relationships and between state and citizens that shape features of education policy domains and the ways policies play out;
- The role of ideas and incentives in shaping all of the above; and
- Addressing the global, by avoiding methodological nationalism asking, for example, how transnational factors shape domestic policy and social processes

Drawing on Levy and Walton (2013) and the political settlements work of Khan (2000, 2010), both Levy and associates' and Hickey and Hossain elaborate analytic frameworks that train attention on (1) features of countries' "political settlements," (2) features of "public

[3] See Levy, Brian, Robert Cameron, Ursula Hoadley, and Vinothan Naidoo, Eds. *The Politics and Governance of Basic Education: A Tale of Two South African Provinces*. Oxford University Press, 2018; and Hickey, Sam, and Naomi Hossain, eds. *The Politics of Education in Developing Countries: From Schooling to Learning*. Oxford University Press, 2019. Pritchett's three essays addressing these works are listed in the references.

governance," (3) and the variable ways in which these can combine and interact across different levels of government or governance to impact learning outcomes. As Pritchett (2018) notes, the frameworks represent an advance in the political economy of learning by providing a way of studying "the proximate determinants of the proximate determinants" of learning in a way that underscore the context-specific features of the political economy of learning and illustrate the multiple different and possible ways in which countries can succeed or fail in promoting desired learning outcomes. As Hickey and Hossain (p. 39-40) emphasize, the idea is not that features of politics *determine* the development of education systems but rather continuously affect and condition their development.

Embedding analytic frames: 2X2s, 4X4s, and Triangles

Recent literature on the political economy of learning provides concepts and analytic frames that are useful for understanding the development and performance of education systems. Pritchett's (2019a) characterization of these as "workhorse models" speaks to their straightforwardness and value for distinguishing features of political settlements in different contexts. Three models are of particular interests. The first of these is a diagnostic tool for locating political settlements within a more or less defined universe of possibilities, while the second identifies features of public governance. The third provides a way of thinking about political settlements and features of public governance at different levels (e.g. national, regional, local, and so on). Each of these have value for thinking about the way education systems are embedded in specific social environments and will be addressed in relation to Vietnam in the subsequent section.

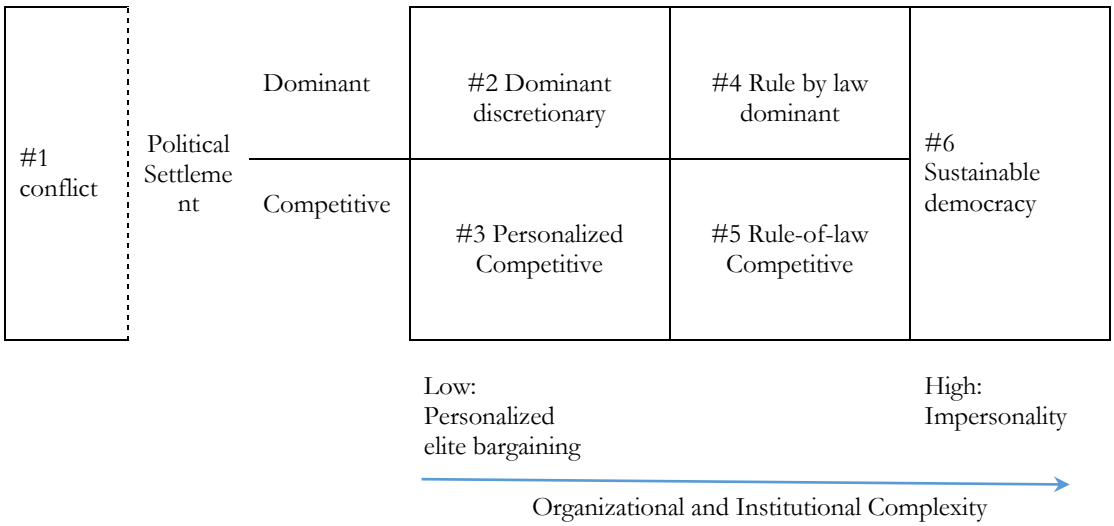
Political settlements

Khan's (2000, 2010, and 2017) defines political settlements as "a combination of power and institutions that is mutually compatible and also sustainable in terms of economic and political viability," even as the presumption that power and institutions are distinct is ill founded.

Drawing on Khan, the work of Douglass North, and on Levy's earlier work (2014, 17) both Levy (2018) and Hickey and Hossain (2019) present a common tool for distinguishing among different varieties of political settlements or configurations of power, ranging from those absent a viable political settlement and ridden with perpetual violent conflict and those with more stable political settlements, including "sustainable democracies" (the most stable) (Figure 2, below).

With respect to Figure 2 (below), the broad ranks of the world's countries may be characterized as falling between type 1 "open conflict" and type 6 "sustainable democracy." For these countries, the tool captures variation across two dimensions: These include whether a political settlement is "dominant" (i.e. single party, single ruler–dominated) or "competitive" (e.g. multi-party systems, multiple power centers) on the one hand and the extent to which "rules of the game" (formal and informal institutions shaping politics) are personalized or impersonal on the other. This generates five ideal typical political settlements.

Figure 2. Conceptual framework of Political Settlements



Adapted from Levy 2014.

One of the ways in which the character of political settlements matter may be seen is with respect to commitments to promoting education reforms aimed at enhancing learning.

Specifically, as Hickey and Hossain explain, the analysis of national political settlements in relation to education is "focused explicitly on the political factors that shape the extent to which elite actors become committed to adopting and implementing educational reforms aimed at improved learning outcomes (Hickey and Hossain 2019, 23)." Globally it has been observed that, while all sorts of politicians and states (e.g. totalitarian, democratic, and various shades of authoritarian) have interests in promoting the expansion of schooling (Paglayan 2018), the implementation of reforms focused on enhancing learning are less appealing, as they require long periods of time and do not offer tangible political payoffs.

Both Levy et al and Hickey and Hossain suggest that dominant settlements' low levels of vulnerability tend to enhance their interests in and capacity for pursuing and promoting long-term policy orientations, though by no means assures their success; particularly in the education policy domain, which depends on social processes and institutions across multiple levels of governance, from the level of elite politics to and into the schools classrooms.

Public governance

Public governance may be understood as the formal and informal arrangements that shape how public decisions are made and in the context of a dynamic social environment (De Francesco and Guachino 2020). In distinguishing features of public governance Levy (2014), drawing on Ostrom (1990, 2005a, 2005b), introduces two further sets of distinctions. These include, first, the distinction between hierarchical, 'vertical' relationships between principals and agents and more 'horizontal, negotiated understandings among multiple principals more or less equal in power. And, second, the distinction between impersonal (i.e. impartial and independent) vs. personalized (i.e. 'deals-based') rules, monitoring arrangements, and enforcement mechanisms. This, too, generates four ideal type patterns of public governance, as in Table 1.

Table 1 A Public Governance Typology

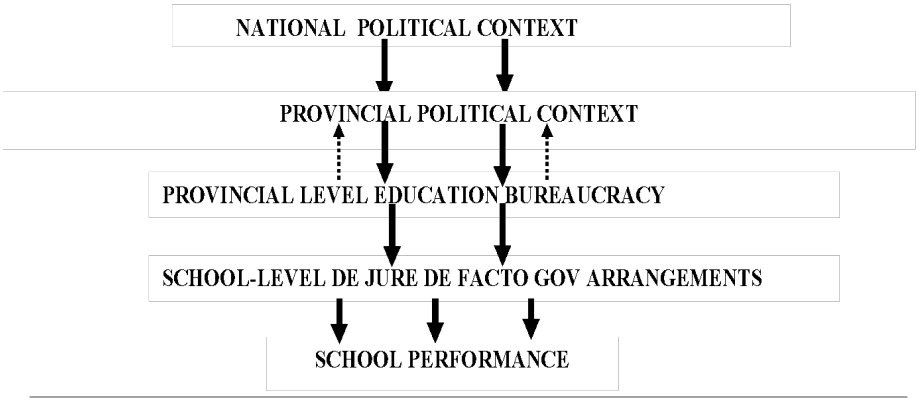
Hierarchical	(i)	(ii)
Negotiated	(iii)	(iv)
	Personalized	Impersonal

Adapted from Levy 2014

As Levy explains, the top left cell (i) is that of an personalized, hierarchical mode of decision-making and implementation in which the compliance of agents stems from personalized authority and other attributes rather than rules; the top right (ii) indicates a (Weberian) pattern of hierarchical, impersonal rules; whereas the bottom left (iii) delineates a pattern in which multiple stakeholders reach agreement and shared understandings of common impersonal rules. Finally, the lower right cell (iv) depicts a pattern in which neither rules nor hierarchy prevails and where agreements depend on the understanding of specific parties. [Notably Levy's representation of this (Levy 2018, 16) includes a regrettable mix-up of the tables and roman numerals, resulting in misaligned depiction of the cells and their meanings.] As Levy points out, in the actually existing world, we are likely to observe hybrids of these patterns, or variation within a country (across different levels of government and governance or geographic areas) and even across and within different policies and policy elements. Nonetheless, there is a distinction to be made between forms of public governance and political systems based on "deals" and those based on rules.

These lead us to a final element of the framework, in which both features of politics and features of governance are fitted to a nested, multilevel analysis, represented in Figure 3, below (presented as figure 1.1 in Levy 2018, 24). In Figure 3 we have a potentially powerful if dauntingly complex set of nested relationships among levels of government and governance each of which bears on schooling and learning outcomes.

Figure 3 A Multi-Level Framework



Adapted from Levy 2018

Attention to variability vertically nested social scales is consistent with Levy, Hickey and Hossain's observation that understanding the origins, properties, and effects of political settlements and patterns of public governance and their relation to education systems requires attention to variegated subaltern (including local) realms; terrain comparative education studies as the national level sometimes ignore. Once we do this, we can more easily "zoom in to" and "zoom out from" variably-scaled "action arenas" (Ostrom 2005a) -- in this case education systems; within which the "determinants" and "determinants of determinants" of learning operate, though perhaps avoid Ostrom's weddedness to methodological individualism. In essence, Levy, Hickey and Hossain rightly identify political settlements and public governance as foundational aspects of social life that shape systems of education through dynamic processes that extend and flow across multiple levels of governance.

Critical reception

In a series of essays (Pritchett 2018, 2019a, 2019b), Lant Pritchett has responded to ideas and analytic frames put forward in Levy et. al. and Hickey and Hossain, assessing both their

contributions to an understanding of particular cases as the broader conceptual and analytical problems their work poses. While he finds the framework to be "a massive conceptual improvement" over previous approaches and an "important step forward in the politics of learning" (Pritchett 2019a), he also has reservations. Broadly, he applauds the volume's focus on "the proximate determinants of the proximate determinants of learning" (there has to be a better way to say that!) and welcomes Levy's warning to avoid "more of the same" approaches such as spending more on education inputs (as in Indonesia) without disrupting dysfunctional patterns of public governance and accountability (vertical, horizontal, and diagonal, short and long). The work of Levy, Hickey and Hossain et al. is especially useful when read alongside other recent contributions to the neo-institutionalist analysis of education and learning (see, for example, Crouch, Evans and Popova 2004; Gift and Wibbels 2014; Grindle 2017, Kingdon et al. 2014; Tikly and Barrett 2014; and Bruns, Macdonald and Schneider 2019).

As for reservations, Pritchett emphasizes the generic need to appreciate both the value and limits of "raw phenomena of country/regional experiences in all their messy contextual complexity," and to pursue more granular analysis of the politics of education that captures nuanced differences in the political dynamics in different contexts but also (even) in different parts of education systems within a given country (ibid 206-8). He illustrates this latter point elsewhere (2019b) by way of Bruns and Schneider's (2016)distinction between the politics of schooling and the politics of teaching, and how the dynamics and stakes of policy adoption and implementation as well as the short or long-term payoffs can different vastly for different actors in an education system.

Tensions and Complementarities with the RISE Conceptual Framework

The (RISE) programme's accountability framework construes education systems as a set of principal-agent relationships among a multiplicity of actors and interests and, as such, offers an analytic framework for understanding how various relations in the system promote or undermine the promotion of education and learning (Pritchett 2015). Four major groups of actors in an education system are said to include (1) citizens, parents and students; (2) frontline providers (teachers, principals); (3) organisations (Ministries, local government bodies, schools; and (4) the executive state (politicians and policy-makers). The framework presents a representation of idealized relations of accountability among these actors whereby politicians are accountable to the citizens; ministries and local authorities are accountable to politicians for delivering on policy goals; teachers and principals are accountable to ministries and local government for teaching the curriculum to a high standard. In some contexts, teachers and principals may be directly accountable to parents via various feedback and governance mechanisms.

According to the RISE framework, each of these relationships may be assessed across five dimensions or "design elements." These include delegation, finance, support, information, and motivation. Viewed from this standpoint, education ministries can be seen to set performance goals for teachers (delegation), provide resources to meet needs and achieve policy goals (finance), assist subordinate agencies in meeting obligations and goals (support), monitor provinces, districts, schools, and teachers' performance (information) and, in some instances, incentivise actors to improve their performance by various means (motivation). The RISE framework trains attention on these relationships, inviting exploration of how their properties may or may fail to support the promotion of policy goals nationally and at local levels. Aspirationally, the RISE framework is meant to be amenable to a 'thick' or 'enabling' diagnostic, which would aim to understand why certain policies or policy reforms succeed or fail by relating features of education systems to their broader political economy context. In this way the RISE framework is complementary to PEL literature discussed above. Henstridge et al. (2019) suggest

the RISE diagnostic could be strengthened through greater attention to political and social forces specific settings. Exploring how education systems and the relationships of accountability that constitute them are embedded in national and local institutional contexts is essential for an analysis of their performance around learning and is a central concern of the current paper and the ongoing research to which it refers.

Thicker means more embedded: From national political economies to social orders

One of the most promising aspects of the PEL literature and the effective states and political settlements literature forces us to confront (and not lose sight) of education systems' always-embedded character, i.e. the notion and reality that education systems' performance is shaped by the broader social orders in which they develop. In marks a major shift and an in advance in thinking about education systems and reflects, on some levels, Polanyi's (1944) insistence on the embeddedness of market economies: Like economic systems and indeed all economic aspects of social behavior, education systems and activities are socially-embedded in national and local contexts. Like economies, the governance of education systems is a political practice whose features reflect prevailing interests and power relations in specific historical settings. All of this is consistent with Kingdon's observation that "political economy," done right, considers not simply politics and economy but structural, historical, institutional conditions (Kingdon et al., 46-47), i.e. how education systems are shaped by properties of social orders.

In the contemporary context, nationally-scaled political economies are best understood not as economies or politics or even societies, but as globally embedded social orders: nationally scaled, multi-leveled, territorially delimited networks of power defined and animated by dynamic social relational and institutional attributes specific to each country and their historical paths to the present (London 2018). This is consistent with the idea that political settlements, patterns of public governance, together with education systems and institutions across other social fields are co-constitutive of a broader social order or inter-institutional regime (c.f. Brachet-Marquez

2014). Contrary to Khan's conception of political settlements, power is reflected and operates through both social relations and the institutions to which they give rise. Power and institutions, that is, are more often than not *indistinct* and nor can they be understood from the social orders that contain them.[4] The question for education systems is how their embeddedness in dynamic social orders shapes their performance around learning.

In this regard the PEL literature has done the important services of provoking questions about how features of politics and public governance shape education systems' performance. Importantly, it has drawn interest of researchers working in diverse settings and working from within different theoretical orientations, including approaches that outwardly reject methodological individualism in favor of an appreciation of how diverse forms of power relations, norms, and modes of human agency can shape education systems' functions. Indeed, the PEL agenda and the RISE programme stands to benefit from "thicker" accounts, drawing on insights from multiple research traditions, perhaps especially those that combine a conceptual understanding of the PEL literature with in-depth understandings of local (i.e. national, subnational, and grassroots) education systems. In doing so, it will also be useful to revisit established (if sometimes forgotten) bodies of research, such as in sociology of education, which have generally not been engaged by the RISE programme to date.[5] The current essay can respond to this only in a precursor to continued work by way of an analysis of Vietnam, principally by extending the conceptual framework developed within the RISE program in a way that is more explicitly attentive to the problem of embeddedness.

[4] Noting the wide use of the term 'political settlement' in the development and donor community that often goes to length to avoid the direct analysis of politics, Behuria, Buur and Gray (2017, 511) nonetheless remind us that the framework is centrally concerned with understanding institutions and power relations as definitive features of social orders.

[5] At a panel featuring an early version of this paper in 2019, Karen Mulder pointed out that the recent development of literature on the political economy of education and learning should draw more than it has on the sociology of education.

VIETNAM: EXPLORING DEEP DETERMINANTS OF LEARNING

Like all social systems and all aspects of social life, education systems and efforts at promoting learning are dynamic processes embedded in specific social relational and institutional contexts. Correspondingly, the intellectual task of understanding the development and performance of a country's education system and the proximate and "deeper" social-institutional determinants of learning within them requires going beyond superficial and/or static descriptions of formal institutional attributes of education policies, political settlements, or bureaucratic indicators of performance. We require, instead, thickly descriptive dynamic models and sufficiently granular accounts that reflect concretely the ways education systems are embedded in their social and institutional environments and how this impinges on proximate determinants of learning within them. In doing so we gain a greater appreciation of the conditions under which improvements and gains in education and learning can be sustained and, from this, generate ideas for action fitted to specific social, political, economic, cultural, and geographical contexts across and within countries. Such an approach allows us to explore the RISE hypothesis that education systems' performance is determined by the coherence of accountability relations throughout the system.

Proceeding from the foregoing discussions of features of Vietnam and its education system and the political economy of education and learning, the discussion below proposes that dynamic properties of Vietnam's social relational and institutional environment, at times, enhances its education system's accountability and coherence with respect to the promotion of education and learning. I begin by establishing key features of Vietnam's market-Leninist social order. I then train attention on three features of the embeddedness of Vietnam's education system, each of which I propose *sometimes* operate as mechanisms of countervailing power. These include: (i) the presence of a perpetual political process of party politics that is interpenetrated with the functioning of the education system in ways that may counteract lacklustre performance; (ii) the presence of a system of co-payments that may induce teacher and school accountability to students; (iii) the presence of an (at times) highly engaged society reflected in an

extraordinarily well-developed education public sphere to which education sector personnel are highly attuned. While acknowledging the need for additional research, I will suggest how, under certain conditions, these features are co-present in ways that bring accountability-enhancing forces to bear on the public governance, the management of education, teaching, and efforts to promote learning. Overall, the analysis demonstrates highly specific features of Vietnam's socially embedded education system. It also makes a more general point, suggesting that the co-presence of multiple and even oppositional rationalities within and around an education system can be integral to an education system's coherence around learning.

Zooming out: Lineages and attributes of Vietnam's consolidated market-Leninist order

As with the analysis of economic systems, the analysis of systems of education begins with deep cognizance of their embeddedness within the broader social orders that contain them. Peering into Vietnam's social order, we observe that it is a mixed, dynamic set of norms and rules produced and transformed over time through social relations specific to Vietnam and its historical path to the present. The aim is to explore how Vietnam's education systems (at varied scales) have embedded within this dynamic social order from past to present. Here we only acknowledge major features of this historically emergent social order. These include centuries of agrarianism overlain by a loose imperial system laden with Confucian influences transmitted during and after nine centuries of Chinese domination, centuries more of interregional political contestation and anti-imperialist (i.e. anti-Chinese struggles), colonial domination at the hands of the French and Japanese, a spirited and variegated tradition of anti-colonial struggle that saw explosive growth in the early 20th century, the rise and subsequent dominance of the Communist Party of Vietnam (established in 1930), the deadly and traumatic influences of the U.S. war in Vietnam– an international and civil war that visited decades of hardship on Vietnam, and pre-war and post-war efforts to develop a centrally planned economy that collapsed in the face of

crushing poverty and international isolation (London 2011). Since the early 1990s Vietnam has had one of the fastest growing economies in the world.

A distinctive and socially embedded party-state political settlement

At the core of contemporary Vietnam's social order is an enduring dynamically stable political settlement forged by the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV), an organization that traces its origins more than a century and whose development and behavior has shaped social life in Vietnam more than any other social force. Analysis of the party, its apparatuses and activities, the sources, attributes, and limits of its power and influence and the features of public governance must lie at or near the center of any account of the politics of Vietnam's education system and learning within it. In Vietnam, the combinations of power and institutions that have prevailed over time have varied in their character and in ways that have adapted to rapidly changing domestic imperatives and international conditions. This is a party that has withstood and indeed governed in periods of massive violence and rapid societal transformation.

According to Levy's typology (2014, 17), Vietnam (along with China and Cambodia in Asia), are examples of a dominant settlement. But such characterizations tell us little about the attributes of Vietnam's politics and broader social order. As a practical matter, the country's political settlement is not that of a personal dictator (in contrast to China) and has not been since the 1970s (under Lê Duẩn). And nor is the characterization of the Party or even its commanding heights as a singular corporate actor particularly helpful. On the contrary, Vietnam's political settlement features a dominant party that, while firmly in control of national politics, is riven with factions and exercises only limited control over the provinces that in formal terms are under its authority. In this way, Vietnam's politics differs fundamentally from China (for example), whose politics have been defined much more centrally and by a succession of personal dictators, from Mao to Xi.

Since its earliest stages of development in the early 20th century to its formal establishment as the Indochina Communist Party in 1930 and since, the CPV has sought to impose its own understanding of the democratic aspirations of the Vietnamese people by consolidating and reproducing its political economy into a political settlement that is among the most durable on earth; surviving, as it has, conditions of total war and the rise and fall and rise of economic systems (Bui T.H. 2013). In effect, it has instituted a market economy that, while not wholly subordinate to Party rule, has nonetheless proven highly functionally compatible with the Party's primary political goals and has stimulated capital accumulation and bolstered national development in ways the planned economy could not.

Public governance and political commitment in practice

Many features of Vietnam's education system and its performance around learning can be traced to specific features of Vietnam's political settlement and, in particular, to the CPV's extraordinary and sustained political commitment to promoting schooling, education, and learning. While the character and motivations of CPV's commitment to education are complex and the efficiency and effectiveness of its education policies is the subject of research and lively debate, the resources and energy the party devotes to education have been substantial.

It is certain that part of Vietnam's leadership commitment to education has to do with the education system's socialization functions. In Vietnam, as in other single-party states, the socialization functions of the education system are especially pronounced, exemplified by the red scarf millions of Vietnamese students don on a daily basis and the ubiquitous daily recitation of patriotic memes. Still, while CPV's interest in the socialization functions of education may help to explain its political commitment to education, it is less helpful in explaining the apparent effectiveness of Vietnam's education system in promoting learning in comparison to other countries. Furthermore, while some features of socialization may benefit learning, others may not. Many Vietnamese, for example, have complained that their education system's orientation

toward the absorption of information through memorization (or 'rote learning') promotes test-taking skills more than learning, while others have questioned the relevance of curricula. In Vietnamese policy circles, debate frequently dances around, but rarely addresses, tensions and contradictions stemming from the need to promote critical thinking, intellectual curiosity, and skills for a world market within an education system geared to promote normative conformity.

Countries around the world have adopted decentralizing measures as a strategy of reforming government. Some have taken this very fast and far. Vietnam is one such country. Proponents of decentralization laud its prospective contributions to government efficiency and responsiveness, even as decentralization has often failed to achieve these outcomes. Informed by heroic assumptions of neoclassical economics, international organizations have actively promoted decentralization, often finding common cause with political elites keen to decentralize for reasons of political expediency. Shedding power and responsibility is an effective means toward building and sustaining political support. In Vietnam, decentralization has promoted the development of a multi-layered system of government that combines a formally centralized hierarchical political system with a system of political decision-making that is more loosely organized than those unfamiliar with Vietnam might expect.

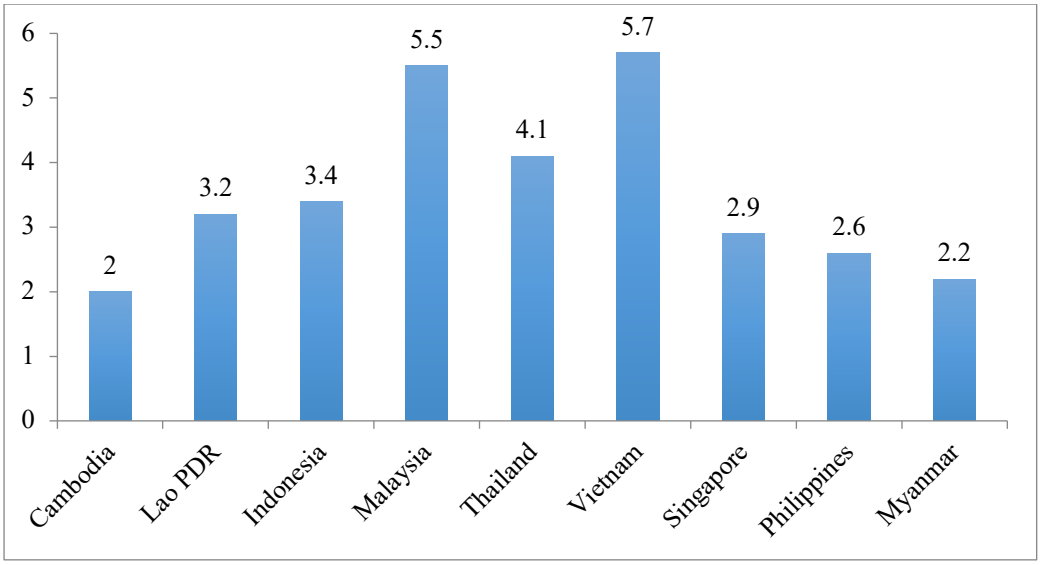
In its ongoing analysis of Vietnam's education system, the RISE CRT has observed two features of public governance of special interest for their potential importance in promoting or limiting future improvements in the system's coherence for learning. The first of these has to do with specific features of decentralization. Foreigners unfamiliar with Vietnam may be surprised to know the country and its education system are governed through a highly and possibly over-decentralized system within which Vietnam's 63 provinces are given unusually high levels of discretion with respect to the allocation of budgetary funds for education. An additional surprise is that, while in formal terms Vietnam's education policies require the collection of comprehensive data on education, including teacher, students, and school performance, the

reality is that the collection and (especially use) of information is extremely thin, excepting all but a small minority of provinces.

The situation is in some respects paradoxical. On the one hand, central norms dictate provinces must allocate 20 percent of their annual budgets for education, which seems indicative of Vietnam's commitment to education. On the other hand, however, Vietnam's law on the national budget makes zero specification of norms and standards provinces may not violate. Further, data from interviews with dozens of central level officials indicates that, to date, only in a small minority (less than a third) of provinces are there meaningful interactions among these different stakeholders. The result, effectively, is 63 provinces with 63 education systems with little or no national overview of how provinces are managing education or performing with respect to the promotion of learning.

Despite these concerns, there are many other features of Vietnam's political settlement and political system that support the education system's coherence for learning. An additional indication of political commitment and a likely contributor to Vietnam's record of performance has been that, while private spending on education continues to grow, the Communist Party of Vietnam has itself maintained high levels of public support for education, approaching 5.7 percent (in 2017) of an expanding GDP, compared with 3.6 for Indonesia (2015) and 2.6 for the Philippines (in 2012). Annually, education spending accounts (by formal requirement) for 20 percent of the state budget.

Figure 4 Public expenditure on education, Southeast Asia



Created from: World Development Indicators 2018
Series : Government expenditure on education, total (% of GDP)

The question of how much public and private value Vietnam gets for spending and efforts leads us to a second aspect of the politics of learning: public governance. Furthermore, as will be highlighted below: despite constant increases in public spending, education budgets in Vietnam at the local level (as in most developing countries) frequently falls short of what is needed to fulfil central government norms. In the parlance of the RISE (2015) conceptual framework, this results in a "compact" (relation of delegation between the government and local managers) that is incoherent in that what is delegated far outstrips sources of public "finance" or "support" available or flowing to local levels. Indeed, Vietnam's increases in public expenditure on education occurred subsequently to the complete breakdown of public finance in the late 1980s and early 1990s and, with it, an explosion of public participation in education include, most notably, contributions of households to schools in formal and informal ways.

Conjecture 1: Party politics in practice sometimes counteracts lacklustre performance

Other expressions of political commitment may be hidden from view. Among these is the functioning and substance of Vietnam's distinctively Leninist framework, which interpenetrates

the organization and operation of official government structures and service delivery units is interpenetrated by structures and organs of the communist party. The suggestion here is that having both official government structures *and* a perpetual organized parallel political process within them makes "management" relationships within the bureaucracy more accountable to national political priorities than might be the case in a purely top-down government bureaucracy (even in a democratic polity), where local officials, managers, and front line service-delivery personnel (including principals and teachers) might lack passion for education or learning and may face no countervailing political force. We know the CPV plays a central role in the management of schools and teachers. As McAleavy et al., the Education Trust (2018: 21) reported.

> 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 DIET or BOET. Schools are also answerable to local representatives of the Communist Party.

Such evidence is intriguing in the context of comparisons of features of public governance and education in Vietnam and other countries. For example, one of the noted features of Vietnam's education system is the professionalism of its education workforce. Teachers show up on time and are driven by a professional ethos, in part because Vietnam's political organization demands consistent attention to education from the level of policymaking to the daily management of Vietnam's 63 provinces, 700+ districts, 11,000+ communes, and urban wards, and to its tens of thousands of schools. Whether it is the party or some other force of nature, some 87 percent of students surveyed by the OECD agreed or strongly agreed their teachers show enjoyment in teaching, compared to an average 74 percent for the OECD (OECD 2019). The same cannot be said for most countries. Vietnam's political settlement is riddled with patronage networks and patron-client relations trained both on political advancement and material gain, but not always the promotion of teaching and learning. While the education system exhibits many features of commercialization, and the commodity status

and transactional nature of even public education is exacerbated by widespread corruption (Towards Transparency 2018).

Having the constant presence of a party cell functioning with religious levels of conviction in the historical indispensability of the Party as a political and moral force may indeed make a difference. While it is widely assumed to be true, the notion that party members in Vietnam (and China) do not take ideology seriously is demonstrably inaccurate (Vu 2016). By contrast, there is little evidence ideology matters much in Cambodian or other variants of post-socialist communism, suggesting the limits of simple characterizations of regime-type analysis (c.f. Croisant 2013, McGuire 2013). Beyond the party, Vietnam exhibits a range of party-controlled 'mass organizations,' including education-oriented associations such as the Study-encouragement Association (Hội Khuyến Học) that beg attention and which are addressed in the companion papers to this analysis. The overarching question, then, is how, with what patterns of variation, and under what conditions do operations of the (de jure socialist) party-state enhance or inhibit accountability with respect to education policy goals?

Multidimensional societal buy-in

Beyond the Communist Party of Vietnam's extraordinary political commitment to education and the ombudsman-like role of party-politics noted above, a third analytically fuzzy but undeniably real feature of Vietnam's education system is what is perhaps best described as it high levels of societal commitment or "societal buy-in." These include the financial investment of Vietnamese households in the education system and the indirect but high levels of public engagement in education one observes in Vietnam, both in the state controlled media and the limited but expanding social media spaces that have revived long dormant traditions of social criticism. As will be argued below, these two distinct but related aspects of societal buy-in provide an

additional source of accountability which, while not always effective, help to foster conditions conducive to learning in ways unseen in many if not most other developing country contexts.

Conjecture 2: Literal buy-in induces fuzzy accountability

In the policy literature, public governance comprises features of social relations and formal and informal institutions that shape conduct and outcomes of public policy and, in the context of education, the development, daily operations, and performance of education systems. A key insight from recent literature is that features of public governance across, and even within, countries can powerfully shape the coherence or incoherence of education systems for learning. Mushtaq Khan (2017) has made the important distinction between an elite-centered analysis of political settlements and one focused on the relation between organizations within a broader political economy. We see his point when we shift from an analysis of elite bargains to features of public governance that prevail within the country at the grassroots. A key problem identified in the RISE framework is prevailingly low levels of client power across much of the world.

While Vietnam's national political settlement is characterized as dominant, the features of the country's public governance reflect a more complex and variegated set of principles. It is a system that combines well-elaborated (if frequently problematic) formal designs with informal practices and deal making familiar to most developing countries. A fascinating twist is that these materially consequential patron-client relations function within the interstices of a communist party-mediated personally mediated market economy deals. Formal and informal payments and deals with local schools and teachers – while sometimes corrupt – are nonetheless pervasive features of Vietnam's education system and are tied with circumstances specific to Vietnam's transition from a centrally planned to more market-based economy.

Part of Vietnam's societal buy-in is quite literal. In the late 1980s, Vietnam experienced an acute fiscal crisis that effectively required the abandonment of central planning in favor of a

market-based economy. The education system was hit hard, with many localities experiencing 30 and even 40 percent declines in enrolment over a two-year period, delays in staff pay lasting months, the works. To prevent the collapse of the public education system, Vietnam's government and people resorted to a system of formal and informal co-payments to finance education; an arrangement that is known as "socialization/societalization policy" and persists until this day. Since then, there has been explosive growth in enrolments and average years of schooling and broad improvements in test scores. Moreover, Vietnam has performed well in redistributing financial resources in a way that permitted other areas of the country to catch up. While these arrangements should not be romanticized (for example, they have at times created space for opaque and corrupt management practices), the fact that up to 40 percent of finance for *public* education is out of pocket has elevated levels of public engagement in the education system (Bui ibid.). A hypothesis worth exploring is whether and under what conditions various forms of co-payments demonstrably affect teaching and learning.

What appears to be or is indeed a weakness in Vietnam's education system – namely the central state's inability or failure to allocate public funds needed to achieve formally mandated education sector goals can have complex effects. On the one hand, it comes at the cost of "order" as the central state and delegated responsibilities but insufficient funds and at the cost of "regularity" and some horizontal equity in that education finance decisions are conferred to provinces. What has been gained, on the other hand, is what Pritchett in a commentary on this paper has called "real"(i.e. substantive) local engagement with edge…

> as parents and communities were coming [to pay] out of pocket and hence "bought" "ownership" over teacher/school behavior. This was informal in ways one could call corrupt, but against the alternative of a fully funded from the top system that had zero local accountability it might just be that "you get what you pay for." So maybe the "bug" of an underfunded system was, given the parallel contestation and the social embeddedness, actually a (coherence making) feature.

Conjecture 3: Public engagement: state media, social media, and public criticism enhance accountability

Though Vietnam exhibits a one-party system that limits space for political pluralism, the country exhibits high levels of civic engagement in education. Though their channels of expression may be limited to online expression, individual complaints and appeals mechanisms, and state-owned media, it is nonetheless the case that Vietnam exhibits dense civil society-like properties in the field of education. While absent effective rules based institutions, controversies and scandals around corruption and extensive informal payments have facilitated an engaged citizenry, reflected in schools' increasing if not universal adoption of more transparent fees schedules (Bui 2013). Vietnam's vibrant social media scene (particularly Facebook, but also other platforms) has given rise to forms of social expression that exert pressures on officials at all levels regarding issues in various aspects of life including education (Kerkvliet, 2019; Nguyen, T.G. 2018).

TOWARD A POLITICAL ECONOMY OF LEARNING IN VIETNAM

While recent scholarship on the politics of education has highlighted features of political settlements and public governance, the analysis of education systems must feature a sociologically thick analysis of education systems that standard econometric approaches cannot provide. This largely conceptual analysis of Vietnam suggests we stand to benefit from a still more encompassing analysis of how education systems and learning (or not learning) are embedded within specific social and institutional contexts. The paper had suggested avenues for further research centered on the appearance of varieties of parallel contestation that exist in Vietnam but are frequently absent in other low- and lower-middle income countries. Given the specific focuses of the RISE program's political economy work, the effects of parallel contestation may well be pursued in specific relation to teacher policy, at RISE PET-A focus.

Among middle- and lower-income countries and indeed among all countries, Vietnam is a country that reflects a spirit of "all in for learning" lacking in many low– and lower-middle

income countries. In its efforts to further promote learning, the country has many things in its favor, including enduring political and societal commitments to education and learning born of historical experiences that are in some respects specific to Vietnam as well as an expanding globalizing economy that presents good opportunities and incentives absent in many other low and middle-income settings. From the perspective of politics, Vietnam possesses an additionally crucial if underappreciated advantage: It is ruled by a political party that has evidenced a sustained commitment to education, reflected not only in its rhetoric but also in high levels of redistributive budgetary support and the consistent attention it gives education through the circuitry of its Leninist political hierarchy. Beyond this, Vietnam's education system is well organized and effective in many respects and messy and ineffective in others, while public and private spending on education is on the rise. As in the United States, Indonesia and other countries show us, Vietnam also shows us that money alone will not buy improvements in education systems' performance. The challenge is *both* to "spend the money and to use it well."

Perhaps most intriguingly, Vietnam suggests the co-presence of multiple and even oppositional rationalities within and around an education system can enhance accountability and an education system's coherence around learning. International experiences suggest accountability can be enhanced in a variety of ways. Multiple studies have observed a similar buy-in education systems and around schools (see Gershberg and Rai 2015, Gershberg 2012). Lee's (2012) comparative analysis of associational networks and welfare states in Korea and Taiwan and Brazil and Argentina, for example, suggests the presence or absence of vibrant independent civil society associations (an element largely lacking in Vietnam) can enhance public authorities' responsiveness to local needs. By contrast, the highly personalist forms of Communist Party rule in Cambodia or parts of China (particularly in the 1990s) can eviscerate accountability relations within an education system, effectively destroying conditions conducive to learning.

Levy, Hickey, and Hossain's work and the analysis in this paper suggests the manner in which political commitment develops or fails to develop can vary significantly within countries

and, likely, across school districts even within a single modestly-sized state or province. An interesting question is whether features of the party's role in Vietnam vary across provinces in ways that influence the governance or implementation of education reforms. With respect to "literal buy-in" and its possible effects on client power, teaching performance, and system coherence, Yuen Yuen Ang's (2016, 2020) analysis is suggestive of the complexity of side-payments and patron-client relations within personalistic bureaucracies.

This paper's approach has been largely conceptual and, in its present form, is structured around a set of stylized facts drawn from existing research on Vietnam. Together with several more empirically oriented companion papers being completed as part of the RISE Vietnam CRT and PET-A work, it will contribute to a more fully-fledged and empirically grounded analysis of the political economy of education and learning in Vietnam. The collective aims of these papers is to unpack the multiple, overlapping, and often hidden modes of accountability that characterize Vietnam's education system. While these accountability features are hardly perfect and exist within a highly complex system, they are nonetheless worth study. Further, while elements of accountability in Vietnam are context-specific, they raise points that will be of general interest for efforts aimed at improving education systems' performance worldwide.

References

Abbott, Andrew. 2016. "Social Processes and Social Order." In Abbott, A., 2016. *Processual sociology*. University of Chicago Press.

Akmal, Maryam. (2017) Vietnam's exceptional learning success: can we do that too? <https://www.riseprogramme.org/blog/Vietnam_Exceptional_Learning_Success>

Andrews, M. 2013. The Limits of Institutional Reform in Development: Changing Rules for Realistic Solutions. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Ang, Y.Y., 2016. Co-optation & clientelism: Nested distributive politics in China's single-party dictatorship. Studies in Comparative International Development, 51(3), pp.235-256.

Ang, Y.Y. 2020. *China's Gilded Age: The Paradox of Economic Boom & Vast Corruption*. Cambridge University Press.

Ansell, B. W. 2008. 'Traders, Teachers, and Tyrants: Democracy, Globalization, and Public Investment in Education'. *International Organization*, 62(2): 289-322.

Ansell, B. W. 2010. From the Ballot to the Blackboard: The Redistributive Political Economy of Education. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Behuria, Pritish, Lars Buur, and Hazel Gray. "Studying political settlements in Africa." *African Affairs* 116.464 (2017): 508-25.

Boli, J., F. 0. Ramirez, and J. W. Meyer. 1985. 'Explaining the Origins and Expansion of Mass Education'. *Comparative Education Review*, 29(2): 145-70.

Booth, D. 2012. 'Development as Collective Action Problem. Addressing the Real Challenges of African Governance'. *Synthesis Report for the Africa Power and Politics Programme*. London: Overseas Development Institute.

Brachet-Márquez, V., 2014. *Contention and Inequality in Mexico, 1910–2010*. Cambridge University Press.

Bruns, B., and B. R. Schneider. 2016. 'Managing the Politics of Quality Reforms in Education Policy: Lessons from Global Experience'. *The Learning Generation Background Paper*. New York: The Education Commission.

Bruns, B., Macdonald, I.H. and Schneider, B.R., 2019. The politics of quality reforms and the challenges for SDGs in education. *World Development*, *118*, pp.27-38.

Bui, T.H., 2013. The development of civil society and dynamics of governance in Vietnam's one party rule. *Global Change, Peace & Security*, 25(1), pp.77-93.

Busemeyer, M. R., and C. Trampusch. 2011. 'Review Article: Comparative Political Science and the Study of Education'. *British Journal of Political Science*, 41(2): 413-43.

Colclough, C. 2012. 'Education, Poverty and Development – Mapping their Interconnections'. *Comparative Education*, 48(2): 135-48.

Corrales, J. 2006. 'Political Obstacles to Expanding and Improving Schooling in Developing Countries'. In: *Educating All Children: A Global Agenda*. Edited by Cohen, J. E., D. E. Bloom, and M. B. Malin, 231-99. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Croissant, A. and Wurster, S., 2013. Performance and persistence of autocracies in comparison: introducing issues and perspectives. *Contemporary Politics*, 19(1), pp.1-18.

Crouch, Luis and Ursula Hoadley. 2018. "The transformation of South Africa's system of basic education." In Levy, B., Cameron, R., Hoadley, U. and Naidoo, V. eds., 2018. *The Politics and Governance of Basic Education: A Tale of Two South African Provinces*. Oxford University Press.

Fabrizio De Francesco & Edoardo Guaschino (2020) Reframing knowledge: A comparison of OECD and World Bank discourse on public governance reform, Policy and Society,

Dang, H.A.H. and Glewwe, P.W., 2018. Well begun, but aiming higher: A review of Vietnam's education trends in the past 20 years and emerging challenges. *The journal of development studies*, *54*(7), pp.1171-1195.

Doner, R. F., and B. Ross Schneider. 2016. 'The Middle-Income Trap: More Politics than Economics'. *World Politics*, 68(4): 608-44.

Education Trust. 2018. *Promising Practice: Government Schools in Vietnam*. London. Education Trust.

Evans, D. K., and A. Popova. 2016. 'What Really Works to Improve Learning in Developing Countries? An Analysis of Divergent Findings in Systematic Reviews'. *The World Bank Research Observer*, 31(2): 242-70.

Evans, P. & Goncalves, Fabiano, 2003. "Beyond 'Institutional Monocropping': Institutions, Capabilities, and Deliberative Development. Sociologias, 5(9), pp.20–63.

Evans, P. and Heller, P., 2015. Human development, state transformation and the politics of the developmental state. *The Oxford handbook of transformations of the state*, pp.691-713.

Evans, P., Huber, E. and Stephens, J.D., 2017. The political foundations of state effectiveness. *States in the developing world*, pp.380-408.

Geertz, C., 1973. Thick description: Toward an interpretive theory of culture. *Turning points in qualitative research: Tying knots in a handkerchief*, *3*, pp.143-168.

Gershberg Alec and S. Rai 2015. "Policy Transfer & Guideposts for Accountability for Complex Education Reforms." Department for International Development.

Gershberg, A.I., González, P.A. & Meade, B., 2012. "Understanding and Improving Accountability in Education: A Conceptual Framework and Guideposts from Three Decentralization Reform Experiences in Latin America." *World Development*, 40(5), pp.1024–1041.

Gift, T., and E. Wibbels. 2014. 'Reading, Writing, and the Regrettable Status of Education Research in Comparative Politics'. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 17(1): 291-312.

Gray, H., 2016. Access orders and the 'new'new institutional economics of development. *Development and Change*, 47(1), pp.51-75.

Grindle, M. S. 2004. *Despite the Odds: The Contentious Politics of Education Reform*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Grindle. M. S. 2017. 'Good Governance, RIP: A Critique and an Alternative'. *Governance: An International Journal of Policy, Administration and Institutions*, 30(1): 17-22.

Fox, J. A. 2015. 'Social Accountability: What Does the Evidence Really Say?' *World Development*, 72(C): 346- 61.

Lee, Stegvan, Mark Henstridge, and Umar Salam. 2019 Thicker Diagnostics Integration of political and economic theory and data for a different and better analysis of development challenges Working Paper November 2019.

Henstridge, Mark, Stevan Lee and Umar Salam. 2019 Thicker Diagnostics Integration of political and economic theory and data for a different and better analysis of development challenges Working Paper November 2019

Hickey, S. and Hossain, N. eds., 2019. The Politics of Education in Developing Countries: From Schooling to Learning. Oxford University Press.

Hickey, S., and S. King. 2016. 'Understanding Social Accountability: Politics, Power and Building New Social Contracts'. *The Journal of Development Studies*, 52(8): 1225-40.

Hickey, S., and T. Lavers. 2016. 'Conceptualizing the Politics of Social Protection Expansion in Low Income Countries: The Intersection of Transnational Ideas and Domestic Politics.' *International Journal of Social Welfare*, 25(4): 388-98.

Holsinger, D.B., 2009. The Distribution of Education in Vietnam: Why Does Equality Matter?. In *The political economy of educational reforms and capacity development in Southeast Asia* (pp. 191-216). Springer, Dordrecht.

Hossain, N., and M. Moore. 2002. 'Arguing for the Poor: Elites and Poverty in Developing Countries'. IDS Working Paper 148. Brighton: Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex.

Joshi, A., and P. P. Houtzager. 2012. 'Widgets or Watchdogs? Conceptual Explorations in Social Accountability'. *Public Management Review*, 14(2): 145-62.

Kelsall, T. 2012. 'Neo-patrimonialism, Rent-seeking and Development: Going with the Grain?' *New Political Economy*, 17(5): 677-82.

Kerkvliet, B.J.T., 2019. *Speaking Out in Vietnam: Public Political Criticism in a Communist Party–Ruled Nation*. Cornell University Press.

Khan, M., 2010. Political settlements and the governance of growth-enhancing institutions. < https://eprints.soas.ac.uk/9968/1/Political_Settlements_internet.pdf>

Khan, M.H., 2013. Political settlements and the design of technology policy. In *The Industrial Policy Revolution II* (pp. 243-280). Palgrave Macmillan, London.

Khan, M. 2017. 'Introduction: Political Settlements and the Analysis of Institutions'. *African Affairs*. Virtual Issue. 1-20

Kingdon, G. G., A. Little, M. Aslam, S. Rawal, T. Moe, H. Patrinos, T. Béteille, R. Banerji, B. Parton, and S. K. Sharma. 2014. 'A Rigorous Review of the Political Economy of Education Systems in Developing Countries. Final Report'. *Education Rigorous Literature Review*. London: Department for International Development.

Komatsu, H. & Rappleye, J., 2017. A new global policy regime founded on invalid statistics? Hanushek, Woessmann, PISA, and economic growth. Comparative Education, 53(2), pp.166–191.

Kosack, S. 2009. 'Realising Education for All: Defining and Using the Political Will to Invest in Primary Education'. *Comparative Education*, 45(4): 495-523.

Kusaka, W., 2017. *Moral politics in the Philippines: Inequality, democracy and the urban poor*. NUS Press.

Lee, C.S., 2012. Associational networks and welfare states in Argentina, Brazil, South Korea, and Taiwan. *World Politics*, *64*(3), pp.507-554.

Lee, H.A. and Choong, C., 2019. Introduction: Inequality and Exclusion in Southeast Asia. *Journal of Southeast Asian Economies (JSEAE)*, *36*(3), pp.281-283.

Levy, B., and M. Walton. 2013. 'Institutions, Incentives and Service Provision: Bringing Politics Back In'. ESID Working Paper 18. Manchester: Effective States and Inclusive Development Research Centre, the University of Manchester.

Levy, Brian. Working with the Grain: Integrating Governance and Growth in Development Strategies. 2014.

Levy, B., Cameron, R., Hoadley, U. and Naidoo, V. eds., 2018. *The Politics and Governance of Basic Education: A Tale of Two South African Provinces*. Oxford University Press.

London, Jonathan 2011. "Contemporary Vietnam's Education System: Historical Roots, Current Trends." In Jonathan London eds. *Education in Vietnam*. ISEAS. Singapore.

London, Jonathan 2013, "The Benefits and Limitations of "Socialization: The Political Economy of Services in Viet Nam'." UNDP Policy Discussion Paper, 2013. – 100 pp.

London. Jonathan. 2018. Welfare and Inequality in Marketizing East Asia. Palgrave.

Lương, Đ.T., 2014. *Giáo dục chủ nghĩa yêu nước Hồ Chí Minh cho thanh niên tỉnh Bắc Giang hiện nay* (Doctoral dissertation, H.: Học viện Báo chí và Tuyên truyền).

Malesky, E. and London, J., 2014. The political economy of development in China and Vietnam. *Annual Review of Political Science*, *17*, pp.395-419.

Mann, M., 2012. The sources of social power: volume 1, a history of power from the beginning to AD 1760 (Vol. 1). Cambridge university press.

McCoy, Alfred William, 1993. *An Anarchy of Families : State and family in the Philippines*, Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin, Center for Southeast Asian Studies.

McGuire, J.W., 2013. Political regime and social performance. *Contemporary Politics*, 19(1), pp.55-75.

Moe, T. M., and S. Wiborg. 2017. 'Introduction'. In: *The Comparative Politics of Education*. Edited by T. M. Moe, and S. Wiborg, 1-23. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Nelson, J. M. 2007. 'Elections, Democracy, and Social Services'. *Studies in Comparative International Development*, 41(4): 79-97.

Nguyen Anh., Minh, N. & Tran-Nam, B., 2016. Corruption and economic growth, with a focus on Vietnam. Crime, Law and Social Change, 65(4), pp.307–324.

Nguyen, Thang V et al., 2017. Local governance, corruption, and public service quality: evidence from a national survey in Vietnam. International Journal of Public Sector Management, 30(2), pp.137–153.

Nguyen, Thu G. (2018). Vietnamese Media Going Social: Connectivism, Collectivism, and Conservatism. *The Journal of Asian Studies*, *77*(4), 895–908.

North, D.C., Wallis, J.J. and Weingast, B.R., 2009. *Violence and social orders: A conceptual framework for interpreting recorded human history*. Cambridge University Press.

OECD. 2019. The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) Results from PISA 2018. <

Ostrom, E., 1990. Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Ostrom, E., 2005a. Understanding institutional diversity, Princeton, NJ [etc.]: Princeton University Press.

Ostrom, E., 2005b. "Doing institutional analysis" Digging deeper than markets and hierarchies. {In *Handbook of New Institutional Economics* (pp. 819-848). Springer, Boston, MA.

Paglayan, A.S., 2018. Democracy and educational expansion: evidence from 200 years. *Unpublished Manuscript*.

Patrinos, H.A., Thang, P.V. and Thanh, N.D., 2018. "The economic case for education in Vietnam." World Bank.

Pham T.M.T. 2018 Bộ trưởng Giáo dục: Người Việt chi 3 - 4 tỷ USD cho du học mỗi năm < https://ndh.vn/thoi-su/bo-truong-giao-duc-nguoi-viet-chi-3-4-ty-usd-cho-du-hoc-moi-nam-1235985.html>

Polanyi, K., 1944. *The Great Transformation*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Postiglione, G.A. & Tan, J., 2007. Going to school in East Asia, Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press.

Pritchett, Lant 2018. "A Review Essay Prompted by the book: *The Politics and Governance of Basic Education: A Tale of Two South African Provinces* Edited by Brian Levy, Robert Cameron, Ursula Hoadley, and Vinothan Naidoo. (Unpublished RISE document.)

Pritchett 2019a. "10. Understanding the Politics of the Learning Crisis: Steps Ahead on a Long Road, *Lant Pritchett*. In Hickey, S. and Hossain, N. eds., 2019. *The Politics of Education in Developing Countries: From Schooling to Learning*. Oxford University Press.

Pritchett 2019b "Learning about the politics of learning" 21 March 2019. https://www.riseprogramme.org/blog/learning-about-politics-of-learning

Pritchett, L. 2013. *The Rebirth of Education: Schooling Ain't Learning*. Washington, DC: Center for Global Development Books.

RISE. 2015. Creating Education Systems Coherent for Learning Outcomes: Making the Transition from Schooling to Learning. Lant Pritchett. Available at <https://www.riseprogramme.org/news/education-systems-need-coherence-be-effective>

Snilstveit, B., J. Stevenson, D. Phillips, M. Vojtkova, E. Gallagher, T. Schmidt, H. Jobse, M. Geelen, M. G. Pastorello, and J. Eyers. 2015. 'Interventions for Improving Learning Outcomes and Access to Education in Low-and Middle-Income Countries: A Systematic Review'. *3ie Final Grantee Final Review*. London: International Initiative for Impact Evaluation.

Tikly, L. 2001. 'Globalisation and Education in the Postcolonial World: Towards a Conceptual Framework'. *Comparative Education*, 37(2): 151-71.

Tikly, L., and A. M. Barrett. 2013. 'Education Quality and Social Justice in the Global South: Towards a Conceptual Framework'. In: *Education Quality and Social Justice in the Global South: Challenges for Policy, Practice and Research*. Edited by L. Tikly, and A.M. Barrett, 11-25. London: Routledge.

Towards Transparentcy 2018. "Corruption in the Education Sector." Towards Transparency Viet Nam. <https://towardstransparency.vn/en/corruption-in-the-education-sector/>

Truong, Thi Hoa. 2020. The effects of corruption on the human capital accumulation process: Evidence from Vietnam. Economics of Transition and Institutional Change, 28(1), pp.69–88.

UNESCO – PEF 1950. UNSESCO Philippines Education Foundation. Cited in in Lasquety-Reyes, J.A., Jolliffe, P.M. & Bruce, T.R., 2019. American Education in the Philippines and Filipino Values. In Southeast Asian Education in Modern History: Schools, Manipulation, and Contest. Routledge, pp. 194–209.

Việt, V.Q., 2006. Chi tiêu cho giáo dục: Những con số' giật mình'! (Education expenditure: some infuriating numbers!) N.P. Unpublished brief.

Vu, T., 2016. *Vietnam's Communist Revolution: The power and limits of ideology*. Cambridge University Press.

Wales, J., A. Magee, and S. Nicolai. 2016. 'How Does Political Context Shape Education Reforms and Their Success?' ODI Dimension Paper 6. London: Overseas Development Institute.

Woodside, A., 1983. The triumphs and failures of mass education in Vietnam. *Pacific Affairs*, *56*(3), pp.401-427.

Woodside, A., 1988. *Vietnam and the Chinese model: a comparative study of Vietnamese and Chinese government in the first half of the nineteenth century* (Vol. 140). Harvard Univ Asia Center.

Woodside, A., 2006. *Lost modernities: China, Vietnam, Korea, and the hazards of world history* (Vol. 9). Harvard University Press.

World Bank. 2012. Vietnam Workforce Development: SABER Country Report 2012. Washington, DC: The World Bank.

World Bank. 2017. 'World Development Report 2018: Learning to Realize Education's Promise'. Washington, DC: World Bank.