

# Adoption, Adaption, and the Iterative Challenges of Scaling Up in Vietnam: Policy Entrepreneurship and System Coherence in a Major Pedagogical Reform

Jonathan D. London

## Abstract

Đặng Tự Ân played a pivotal role in the genesis, adoption, and diffusion of pedagogical and curricular reforms that are transforming teaching and learning in the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. His is a fascinating story of a career that began with the paralyzing disappointment of being assigned to study in a seemingly lowly teacher training college only to culminate, decades later, in his central role in the research, design, piloting, and scaling up of a reform that, despite numerous difficulties, would shape the most far-reaching and progressive curricular reforms in Vietnam's long educational history. This essay uses the case of VNEN, a pedagogical and curricular reform adapted to Vietnam from the Colombian Escuela Nueva (EN) model, to advance our understanding of the challenges policy entrepreneurs and networks of policy stakeholders can encounter in efforts to institute pathbreaking reforms and of the formidable challenges they can encounter in bringing such reforms to scale. In contemporary research on the political economy of education and learning, the notion of an education system's coherence for learning refers to the extent to which an education system develops relations of accountability that support improved learning outcomes across a range of relationships that define an education system and an array of policy design elements that education policies contain (Pritchett 2015, Kaffenberger and Spivack 2022). In the development literature, the notion of iterative adaptation speaks to a process wherein the performance of policies can improve rapidly through experimentation rather than mechanical transplantation of "best practices" (Andrews et al. 2013, Le 2018). From the standpoint of research on education systems and major reform efforts aimed at enhancing learning, the case of VNEN represents a particularly interesting instance of the innovation of pedagogical and curricular reforms that were, at their most successful moments, deeply coherent for learning, but which encountered problems at scale owing to a range of factors highlighted in this analysis. More broadly and however problematic at times, Vietnam's VNEN experience contributed to the broad uptake and diffusion of new curricula and teaching practices. This raises questions about what we can learn from VNEN, including its successes and problems, that may have value for promoting continued improvement in Education systems performance around learning in Vietnam and other settings.

## **Adoption, Adaption, and the Iterative Challenges of Scaling Up in Vietnam: Policy Entrepreneurship and System Coherence in a Major Pedagogical Reform**

Jonathan D. London  
Leiden University  
j.d.london@hum.leidenuniv.nl

This is one of a series of essays 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.D. 2023. Adoption, Adaption, and the Iterative Challenges of Scaling Up in Vietnam: Policy Entrepreneurship and System Coherence in a Major Pedagogical Reform. *Research on Improving Systems of Education*. [https://doi.org/10.35489/BSG-RISE-Misc\\_2023/11](https://doi.org/10.35489/BSG-RISE-Misc_2023/11)

Use and dissemination of this working paper is encouraged; however, reproduced copies may not be used for commercial purposes. Further usage is permitted under the terms of the Creative Commons License.

The findings, interpretations, and conclusions expressed in RISE essays are entirely those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent those of the RISE Programme, our funders, or the authors’ respective organisations. Copyright for RISE essays remain with the author(s).

Đặng Tự Ân played a pivotal role in the adoption, adaptation, and scaling up of pedagogical and curricular reforms that have contributed to the transformation of teaching and learning in the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. A grey-haired bespectacled man in his mid-60s, Ân, whose name rhymes with “run,” shared details of his more than four-decades-long career in Vietnam’s education system as a teacher, principal, mid-level bureaucrat, policy reformer, and public intellectual during in-depth interviews conducted by the author in Hanoi, in 2018 and 2022. His is a fascinating story of a career that began with the bitter disappointment of being assigned to study in a provincial teacher training college only to culminate, decades later, in his central role in the adoption, adaptation, and scaling up of Vietnam Escuela Nueva (VNEN), the most ambitious curricular and pedagogical reforms in Vietnam’s long history.

This essay uses Ân's experiences to trace and understand the evolution and mixed impacts of the VNEN and to explore factors shaping the outcome of reforms adapted from one setting to another. Modeled after *Escuela Nueva*, a pedagogical model pioneered in Colombia and adopted in more than 10 countries, the *VNEN* reforms that Ân and his colleagues adapted to Vietnam took form in the context of Vietnam’s transition to a more market-based economy, the country’s expanding international engagement, and education sector leaders’ search for a promising reform model. VNEN became possible through a combination of policy entrepreneurship, timely high-level political support, and an \$85 million dollar package of foreign assistance. While policy transfer and adaptation can be examined from multiple perspectives, Ân’s path of provincial teacher and headmaster to front-line national policy reformer provide a unique perspective on the historical and contemporary context of the reforms and their genesis and the challenges encountered in the adaptation and scaling up of pedagogical and curricular reforms from one country setting to another. The analysis seeks to enhance understandings of Vietnam’s VNEN reforms while addressing more generic problems of education system coherence and iterative adaptation.

This paper shows how specific features of the VNEN reforms and their implementation combined with features of Vietnam's education system and its public governance to variously support and undermine the achievement of the reforms' stated goals. The essay is organized as follows. The first section identifies the origins and intended contributions of this paper and the data sources employed, and its "identity" as a reflective essay rather than research article. The second section establishes the context of the VNEN reforms' introduction, highlighting the strengths and limitations of Vietnam's education system, with its long-standing elite bias and rigid pedagogical approaches that made VNEN such a striking departure. Turning to the personal experiences of Đặng Tự Ân, the third section traces his role in the adoption, adaption, and implementation of VNEN, first as a pilot program and then on a large scale. It shows how, during its piloting, Ân and his colleagues were able to pursue a hands-on approach wherein stakeholders at the national and local levels were able to flexibly and iteratively problem-solve at a rapid pace. In the process of its implementation at scale, however, rigidities in the VNEN model and its unfamiliarity and disfavor among some generated problems in implementation as well as widely publicized complaints. And how VNEN swiftly became the object of intense and at times bitter and damaging controversies and political infighting, which ultimately led Vietnam's education ministry to vacate its mandatory implementation in favor of its voluntary uptake.

Extending concepts from education systems analysis, section four seeks to make analytical sense VNEN's implementation and impacts. Despite its turbulent path and uncertain impacts on learning, analysis shows VNEN's implementation engendered a process of messy and contested iterative adaptation, and that several key aspects of VNEN'S approach were integrated into Vietnam's National General Education Reforms. In these respects, section five argues, VNEN may be understood as an instance of a reform that saw moments of coherence and incoherence followed by messy iteratively adaptive learning.

## 1. CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF LEARNING

Recent literature on the political economy of education systems in middle- and low-income countries has sought to understand the conditions under which education systems can sustainably promote improved learning outcomes (Pritchett 2015, Levy Et al. 2014, Hickey and Hossain 2019). A subsidiary focus in this literature addresses the conditions under which specific reforms in specific contexts are effective and why. At both the system and policy implementation level, there is a common concern with how social relations and institutions that define education systems support or fail to support improved learning outcomes.

A key concept in this literature concerns an education system's *coherence for learning*, understood as an education system in which multiple stakeholders promote and sustain accountability to the purpose of expanding learning for all (Pritchett *ibid.*, Kaffenberger and Spivak 2022). A second concept of interest concerns iterative adaptive learning, i.e., how and under what conditions processes of policy implementation can inform the adoption of practices that improve policy outcomes. Literature on iterative and adaptive work has been focused on deliberate efforts to perform (and learn from) real time experimental iterations (Andrews, Pritchett and Woolcock 2013). There are less sophisticated but still important processes of “learning by doing” and learning and effectively promoting best practices are worthy of systematic attention, especially because “learning by doing” and promoting best practices in countries made up of innumerable local contexts is difficult to achieve on a large scale. In this context, understanding more about how system coherence and “learning by doing at scale” form (or fail to form) around education reforms aimed at expanding learning is vital, even if apparently highly context dependent.

This paper extends the concepts of system coherence and iterative adaptive learning to the analysis of VNEN's adoption, piloting, and implementation at scale and as a way taking stock and making sense of the promise, the perils, the successes, the stumbles, and the

legacies of a major effort to improve education and learning in Vietnam. Somewhat unusually, the paper traces the life history, career trajectory, and career experiences of a key policymaker to shed light on developmental and contemporary features of Vietnam's education system and to highlight the challenges policy entrepreneurs and policy implementation networks face in shaping education reforms' implementation and impacts.

### **1.1 Research goals**

This essay was conceived during a larger project aimed at understanding determinants of learning in Vietnam in relation to features of the country's education system and its public governance (London 2019). In this context, VNEN is seen as a major reform initiative within the education system whose implementation and outcomes we seek to understand from a systems-focused perspective. The essay has three specific goals. The first of these is to establish the context of the VNEN reform and the impetuses for its adoption and implementation at scale and to identify the confluence of factors that made the reforms possible. Here we require an appreciation of the context of Vietnam's education system. In the literatures on the politics of education and learning and education systems, analysts regularly speak to the need to attend to the features and dynamics of education systems' embedded in their specific societal and historical settings. Research on Vietnam within the RISE program has sought to do just this (London *ibid*, London and Hang 2022). This work has identified the political commitment of Vietnam's ruling Communist Party and the perpetual political process it brings into the education system as an accountability-enhancing strength of Vietnam's education system while also underscoring how features of Vietnam's education system's dynamic governance elicits societal engagement with the education system in ways absent in many other countries. In other instances, features of Vietnam's politics and the public governance of the education system appear to undermine the

expansion of learning. There have also been widely highlighted problems with Vietnam's pedagogies and curricula.

Over the last several decades, scholars have highlighted numerous constraints on learning in Vietnam. While Vietnam has been highly effective in expanding its education system and in getting more children into school, improvements in learning outcomes reveal disparities across different regions as well as socioeconomic groups. Commonly cited weaknesses in education system, include its historic elite bias, (Woodside 1983, London 2011), its weddedness to outmoded pedagogical practices and curricula that diminish the development of children's cognitive and non-cognitive skills (Le 2018b), and its tendency toward commercialization and commodification that translate socioeconomic inequalities into educational inequalities (Phan and Coxhead 2022). The paper aims to show how adoption of largescale pedagogical reforms in Vietnam occurred through a confluence of policy entrepreneurialism and timely political, financial, and technical support from domestic and international actors. In so doing it reminds us of the practical necessity and formidable challenges of aligning and sustaining support for improving learning across multiple sets of relations that make up an education system.

This essay's second goal is to highlight the role of policy entrepreneurs in the evolution of Vietnam's pedagogical and curricular reforms through a focus on the experiences of Đặng Tự Ân. Somewhat unconventionally, it uses the personal experiences of Ân as a proverbial "red thread" to narratively highlight challenges of involved in improving education systems' performance, both generically and in the specific setting of Vietnam. In the emergent literature on education system, there is an increasing interest in and need for research into the experiences of those involved in frontline efforts to design, adapt, and scale up "audacious" education reforms (Reimers 2019, De Almeida 2021). Details of Ân's early career experiences illustrate the context of education policy making in Vietnam while also

helping to grasp changes in his understanding of pedagogy and curriculum over time. In any setting, the development of education reforms depends on concerted efforts by a diversity of individuals, networks, and diverse education system stakeholders. As this paper illustrates, at its inception and piloting phases especially, the VNEN project and its implementation reflected a highly coherent (i.e. accountable and well aligned) set of relations among the policy's political supporters, its architects, local bureaucrats, and frontline staff (e.g., teachers). As this paper also illustrates, for numerous reasons, the coherence characterized VNEN proved difficult to sustain at scale.

One of the thorniest problems in education reforms concerns the challenge of implementing promising reform initiatives at scale. In the emerging literature on education systems performance, analysts have explored the conditions under which “audacious,” large-scale education reforms can or are likely to succeed or fail. The third contribution of this paper is to extend a systems perspective to examine the implementation of VNEN at scale. Beyond proximate determinants of learning (such as schools, well trained teachers, appropriate materials) and the crucial matter of an education reform's design, analysts have identified an education system's coherence for learning as vital to reforms success. In recent papers, members of the RISE Vietnam country research team have sought to establish features of Vietnam's education system and its public governance that support or undermine its coherence for learning (London and Phuong 2022, Phuong and London 2022). The third section of this paper extends the concept of coherence for learning to an analysis of the scaling-up of VNEN. Here, the paper weaves the personal experiences of Ân with other data to illustrate the problems VNEN encountered and how to make sense of them.

The final contribution of this paper is to make sense of VNEN and its impacts. To date, a small number of analyses of VNEN are available in the English language. Some of these have sought to measure its impacts based on learning assessments (e.g., Parandekar et Al. 2017,



Glewwe 2022), and the findings have been mixed. Other scholarship has examined how VNEN's policy implementation at scale diverged from the methods and goals of the EN model (Le 2018a, 2018b), which is a key concern of this paper. Ongoing research examines the methods and effectiveness of teachers using VNEN-inspired approaches in the classroom (DeJaeghere 2021). While also focused on implementation (c.f. Le *ibid*), the present essay is particularly interested in extending the concepts of coherence and adaptive learning as a way of grasping the significance of the VNEN experience in Vietnam and considering its relevance to broader theoretical questions about education system reforms.

## **1.2 An interpretive analysis**

Focusing on a single reform—Vietnam Escuela Nueva (VNEN) this essay traces the conception, adaptation, implementation, and impacts of pedagogical and curricular reform in Vietnam. Its overarching aims are to (1) advance our understandings of the impetuses driving the emergence of VNEN, (2) appreciate the role of Vietnam's pedagogical and curricular reform champions and their national and local policy networks in instigating, piloting, winning support, and implementing reforms, (3) use the heuristic of coherence to identify factors that shaped VNEN's piloting and its more chaotic and possibly less successful implementation at scale. To contribute to the further understanding of VNEN's mixed impacts, outcomes, and legacies through a survey of national and local stakeholders directly involved in the project. The research is a qualitative and interpretive in nature.

The research methods employed comprised several elements and the analysis developed is informed by the extension of the RISE conceptual framework (especially Pritchett 2015) to an historical and contemporary study of Vietnam's education system. In 2016, based on a comprehensive desk study and supplemented by nearly 20 in depth interviews with education sector stakeholders (e.g., policy makers, Party officials, former and

current ministers, and vice-ministers), the present author and associates undertook a diagnostic analysis of Vietnam's education system that sought to clarify the system's coherence and accountability gaps across a set of key relationships and policy design elements. Next, the RISE framework together with SABER survey instruments were used to develop interview protocols trained on features of relations defining the education system and shaping its performance around learning over time. Following these protocols, researchers conducted an additional 90-plus in-depth interviews with education administrators and frontline staff at the national and local levels, with case studies in three Vietnam provinces. This interview data informs the present study's analysis of education system's overall dynamic properties. This study was initially intended to take the form of a detailed policy implementation study in three provinces. Faced with limited data from these localities, interest in VNEN shifted toward an exploration of its evolution, the persons who oversaw its development, and the challenges encountered in scaling it up. Pursuing an interest in policy adoption, the historical analysis developed in Section 2 aims to ascertain the context and impetuses and conditions under which education reformers were able to adopt a policy reform that sharply contrasted with long-prevailing approaches to education in Vietnam.

The analysis presented in sections 3 of this paper draws on the personal life stories of education reformers, including but not limited to those of Đặng Tự Ân. Though anecdotal and subjective in their essence, life stories collected through semi-structured interviews can yield unique and rich insights into social phenomena (Atkinson, Creswell 2010, Goodwin 2012).

Section 4 examines the strengths and weaknesses of VNEN that became apparent over the course of the reform's implementation at scale. Drawing on interview data and a review of relevant Vietnamese and English language documents, including primary and secondary sources, it examines conditions under which various elements of the policy succeeded and failed and why. Here, special attention is given to problems that emerged in

delegation, school support, and motivation that emerged owing to policy decisions and to communication problems that adversely affected the reform's efficacy. The latter included major negative exogenous, particularly in the form of trenchant critiques of the program in the popular press.

### **1.3 Overview and argument in brief**

In contrast to existing scholarship, this essay is concerned less with the measurement of VNEN's immediate and medium-term impacts on learning, which remain unclear, and more to do with what can be learned from the more encompassing "VNEN experience," understood here as a complex instance of policy reform that unfolded dynamically in an education system and its broader social environment. The analysis sheds light on the confluence of circumstances leading to the policy's adoption, which had strong political dimensions and challenges and problems encountered in the piloting and implementation phases, developments that followed the reform program's conclusion, and the prospective impacts of the broader "VNEN experience." In this latter connection, the interpretation advanced here is that VNEN's impacts are best understood not simply with respect to its policy goals. But, equally, to the effects of the reform on ideas and practices in the fields of pedagogical and curricular design over a longer period.

While VNEN's piloting phases exhibited high degrees of coherence owing to personal relationships and hands-on management, the scaling up of VNEN proved problematic. Perhaps inevitably, the scaling up of the reform was attended by variegation in the ways the project was implemented across provinces, districts, schools, and classrooms. Owing to problems highlighted in the analysis, problems emerged that sometimes weakened or disrupted relations of accountability between various project and education system stakeholders, and these were further aggravated by bad press. Viewing VNEN through the

conceptual language of education systems analysis and the concept of coherence can contribute to an appreciation of its successes, setbacks, and mixed impacts. In 2016, when this research began, VNEN was mired in controversy as bad press had tarnished the initiative's public image. Đặng Tự Ân himself, and his like-minded colleagues, faced criticism in the education sector, and their model was subject to public ridicule. At the conference introducing the RISE program, a presentation on VNEN by a young World Bank staffer drew several rounds of critical remarks from the Vietnamese audience that led the RISE research team to distance itself from VNEN or at least make RISE's neutrality clear. These critical remarks obscured a more complex picture.

Evidence as to VNEN's effectiveness is mixed and is discussed in Section 5 of this essay. What is clear is that during its implementation, VNEN was the subject of innumerable news articles in Vietnam's state-controlled but nonetheless spirited press. In these accounts, VNEN was found to effective in some respects and localities and less so in others (a sampling of these are provided in the references). And, as will be shown, VNEN received a great deal of damaging press. Further, over time, constant debate as to VNEN's merits and demerits induced a kind of national "VNEN-fatigue." And yet, as will also be shown many fundamental elements of the VNEN can be found in the National General Education Curricula (NGEC) that has been rolled out since 2018.

From the standpoint of education systems research, the case of VNEN represents a particularly interesting instance of the adaption and diffusion of pedagogical and curricular reforms activated by reform minded policy entrepreneurs and supported politically, financially, and technically by domestic and international actors. The reforms were not universally effective, and long-range impacts remain unclear. At its inception and piloting stages, the VNEN obtained a coherent close working relationship between the policy's designers and those implementing it—elements that became more difficult to sustain as the

reform grew in scale and which were exacerbated by rigidities of those overseeing the program. The result was an increasingly messy implementation process that unfolded in the context of animated national debates about VNEN's future. The termination of VNEN as a compulsory program, in 2016, appeared to mark the end of the unsuccessful reform program. According to one critic, ultimately the implementation of the \$85 million VNEN project "reproduced the rigidity, conformity and textbook dependency that have been core features of the traditional Vietnamese education system (Le 2018b)."

While not denying problems with the VNEN reforms, this essay interprets Vietnam's VNEN experiences in a more optimistic light. Namely, it understands the VNEN reforms as entailing a process of iterative learning that, in the long run, has improved Vietnam's education system. The case of VNEN sheds insight on how coherence can form or fail to form in the process of implementing a reform in Vietnam. What started on a small scale as a piloted program run with a personal touch, grew into a large-scale bureaucratic process beset by problems with coordination and communication. Overall, VNEN is rightly seen as a project that injected new ideas and practices while also spurring a national debate on pedagogies and practices that have moved Vietnam in the right direction.

## 2. ORIGINS AND LIMITS OF A REFORM IMPERATIVE

Vietnam's record of having achieved education and learning outcomes superior to countries with similar and higher levels of income has raised questions about what features of Vietnam and its education system account for such outcomes and what lessons the country might offer for efforts to improve education systems performance in other settings (Dang and Glewwe 2017, London 2019). Within Vietnam, education has a very prominent role in public affairs and there is pride, particularly within the CPV, concerning the education system's many strengths, including its rapid expansion over recent decades and levels of public and private

financial support that exceed levels in most other middle- and low-income countries as a share of GDP. Be that as it may, within Vietnam, representations of the country's education system as an international success story are less common.

Both within the education sector's policy establishment and in the sphere of public opinion, the view in Vietnam is that the country's education system, despite significant and ongoing improvements, has suffered from major longstanding weaknesses, particularly in the areas of pedagogy and curriculum (Attfield and Vu 2013, Luong 2014). Widely-cited limitations of Vietnam's education system in these regards include its rootedness in outmoded and rigidly implemented pedagogical models, outdated curricular content, an orientation to the training up of elite academic and bureaucratic talents and the children of political elites, and the reproduction and aggravation of educational inequalities owing to the rapid commercialization of education (e.g., through the "extra study" or "shadow education system") that has tended to disadvantage children from income-poor households (London 2011a, 2011b, Bray and Lykins 2012, Bodewig 2014). Within the CPV, leaders voiced concerns that, despite numerous positive achievements, the country's education system and its limits in areas of pedagogy and curricular posed immediate and long-term threats to the Party's pursuit of national industrialization and modernization (CPV 2013).

By the 2010s, Vietnam's education system reflected a paradoxical situation. While the system was expanding in terms of enrollment and appeared to perform strongly with respect to learning— at least in international assessments of learning, weaknesses in teaching methods and curricula were combining various problems in the governance of education (e.g., commercialization) in ways that undermined the CPV's stated goal of promoting quality education for all (Tuyên giáo 2011). As the discussion below explains in greater detail, the strengths and weaknesses of Vietnam's education system have a rich and complex history and appeared to defy numerous efforts at reform. And yet, by 2010, a confluence of

factors presented the prospect and policy for course changing policy action. The discussion below specifies the context and explicates developments in the fields of policy and politics that led to interest in VNEN and the political and financial conditions that made its adaptation, piloting, and adoption possible. While focused on Vietnam, the discussion raises broader questions about the conditions under which bold reform initiatives can take form.

## **2.1 The old model: from elite-centeredness to mass education with an elite bias**

Contemporary Vietnam's education system traces roots to antiquity. For centuries, up until the colonial period, education in Vietnam served the administrative needs of dynastic states. For nearly a century dating back to the 1920s, the CPV has sustained efforts to make education available to all citizens and to use education as an instrument of social regulation and societal modernization (London 2011a, Woodside 1983).

However, from its ancient and feudal roots, throughout the colonial period, and even through 20<sup>th</sup> century efforts at revolutionary socialism, education in Vietnam – while becoming increasingly geared to educate the masses, retained an elite bias and an emphasis on rote learning. As Alexander Woodside (1988) has demonstrated, education in Vietnam in the classical (pre-colonial) period, took on an increasingly conservative character, losing its older emphasis on training a scholarly class expert in numerous fields in favor of a model that perpetuated political and economic privilege and descended into corruption. Under the French colonial yoke, Vietnam's education system developed an emphasis on training a class of colonial administrators while formal education remained limited to a tiny share of the country's population (Marr 1981). Education was a tool for training clerks that could capably exploit Indochina's land and people.

Tracing its roots to the 1920s and formally established in 1930, the CPV's efforts to revolutionize the education system took form in the context of anti-colonial struggle. Taking

aim at French education policies designed to keep Vietnamese people docile and dumb (*ngu dân*), the party sponsored literacy campaigns and patriotic anti-colonial education activities across the country. Education, training, and poppropaganda went hand in hand (Marr 1981). In the years leading up to the CPV's declaration of Vietnam's independence and in subsequent decades, the expansion of the education system figured centrally in processes of state formation and state building, through which the CPV extended its power and sought to socialize, civilize, educate, and indoctrinate the country's citizens (London 2011b, Marr 1997). During this period, teaching and pedagogical practices reflected a dualistic character geared, on the one hand, toward the creation of a class of socialist cadres with capabilities in mathematics and sciences on par with socialist bloc countries and, on the other hand, the delivery of mass education (socialization of citizens, literacy, ideology) for the population at large. In wartime, Vietnam's education system reflected the country's war footing.

In the post 1975 period (i.e., in the aftermath of the massively destructive and lethal American War), the CPV extended its education system to the south. The education system retained its dualist elite education and mass education character. At the time, Vietnam was among the poorest countries in Asia and among the most internationally isolated, and dreams of rapid industrialization evaporated. The CPV boasted literacy and enrollment rates on a par with countries with incomes many times higher than Vietnam's. But even this could not be sustained. By the late 1980s, Vietnam's crumbling centrally planned economy and loss of foreign aid from the Eastern Bloc eventuated in an acute fiscal crisis of the state that shook the country and its education system to the core. Between 1988 and 1992, enrollments in primary and secondary education plunged, by 30 to 40 percent in some areas. In the meantime, Vietnam's overwhelming agricultural economy and the effectiveness of its state lacked a skilled workforce—a problem that would persist for decades to come (London 2004).



## 2.2 Success within limits

The rapid economic growth that Vietnam has experienced since the 1990s was crucial for expanding Vietnam's education system and improving its accessibility, but did not dislodge prevailing approaches to teaching and learning. Numerous analyses have documented and analyzed the major strides in Vietnam's education system (Dang and Glewwe 2017). Over the course of the 1990s and into the new century, economic growth together with socialist redistribution and large-scale inflows of foreign aid permitted rapid increases in education spending and the country saw rapid if regionally uneven improvements in enrollments, accessibility, and infrastructure. For two decades after 1990, Vietnam's education system continued to develop impressively in terms of enrollments while foreign expertise gained through ODA provided education policymakers with crucial advice on policy design.

Overall, Vietnam's education system has produced impressive results, but its effectiveness in expanding learning has at times been undermined by adherence to modes of teaching and learning not suited to continuous expansion of learning. On the contrary, the CPV's policies wittingly or unwittingly continued to reflect an *elite-bias*, seen most clearly in the education system's dualistic orientation: training a tiny world-beating cadre of elite students and mass education focused on rote memorization for the rest. This model, which survived into the 21<sup>st</sup> century and elements of which are still visible, rested on outdated teaching methods and a heavy focus on exams. The result was an education system that looked good on paper but under-performed with respect to the formation of skills (FT 2018). At its worst, Vietnam's outdated curricula and pedagogies reduced the education system to socialization and memorization functions, sapping mass enthusiasm for learning.

The CPV's adoption of Resolution 13 (CPV 2013) cited outdated approaches to teaching and learning as among the education system' and country's greatest weaknesses. Along these same lines, a 2014 World Bank study highlighted the education system's failure to equip the country's children with the skills needed to improve the country's economic performance and competitiveness, even as the country registered marks on international assessments of learning that exceeded all countries in its income group (Bodewig et al 2014). Notably, while the Party's adoption of Resolution 13 is seen as a watershed event and is credited with spurring a raft of new reforms, the origins of VNEN itself trace back to before Resolution 13. Indeed, the advent of VNEN helped inform the resolution's contents.

### **2.3 Origins of an audacious reform**

Despite persistent calls for reform within the CPV's ranks and in the populace, and considerable international support for movement in this direction, Vietnam's 21<sup>st</sup> century began with country continuing to lag in the adoption of effective pedagogies. Today, Vietnam's education system reflects fundamental changes, seen concretely in the systemwide pedagogical and curricular reforms that began rolling out in 2018 and which will be fully introduced by 2023 at the primary, secondary, upper-secondary, and kindergarten levels. A concatenation of events spurred these changes.

In 2009, Ân and a small number of reform minded bureaucrats in Vietnam's Ministry of Education and Training learned about the EN model through international engagement sponsored by the World Bank and became excited about prospects for EN's adaption to Vietnam. Crucially, Ân and his colleagues had support. This came in the form of large-scale financial and technical assistance from the World Bank. No less important, VNEN gained political support from high up in the CPV. By 2010, the piloting of VNEN began in six of Vietnam's 63 districts. By 2016 tens of thousands of teachers and millions of students would

adopt the VNEN scheme, with many schools not initially part of the programme or supported by it adopting its key components on a voluntary basis. Key aspects of Vietnam's new curricular materials, and especially the pedagogical philosophy and practices that underpin them, were introduced, tried, and field tested by Đặng Tự Ân and his colleagues in the VNEN program. Understanding the evolution of these developments benefits from the personal experiences in the life and policymaking of Ân himself, which is the theme to which the discussion now turns.

### 3. PROFILE OF A POLICY ENTREPRENEUR AND INNOVATOR

The personal experiences of education ministers and policymakers can provide unique insights for understanding the challenges education reformers confront in undertaking large scale reforms (Reimers 2019, 2020). In this section I recount the experiences of Đặng Tự Ân, a former teacher, pedagogist, and enterprising MOET bureaucrat who was instrumental in the adoption and adaptation of EN to the Vietnam context; the planning, piloting, and implementation of VNEN at scale; and, not least, the development of new curricula and teaching methods that have transformed education and learning in Vietnam. The discussion below provides a synoptic overview of Ân's experiences distilled from interviews with him and his colleagues and consultation of numerous published essays and analyses. The account that emerges highlights the challenges reformers face stemming from the features of education systems within which they work and how these mediate their efforts at reform. Though focused on a single individual, it permits a thicker understanding the context of pedagogical and curricular reforms in Vietnam and the progress and challenges that confront Ân and others' efforts to make the education system supportive of teaching and learning innovations. This sets the stage for a stock-taking account of the overall experience of pedagogical and curricular reforms in Vietnam, which is the subject the subsequent section.

### 3.1 From paralysis to action<sup>1</sup>

Đặng Tự Ân was born in the mid 1950s in Hung Yen province, to Hanoi's immediate southeast. While the northwestern areas of the province are becoming increasingly industrialized, Ân's home district of An Thi remains a largely agrarian district known for its relative poverty and its history of educational achievement. In the three centuries between 1304 and 1637, for example, some 36 residents of the district reached level of doctorate, their names inscribed on stele at Hanoi's Temple of Literature (Nguyen V.C. 2004). Ân, himself, was the son of a famous mathematician and experienced bitter disappointment when local authorities assigned him to receive training at the province's pedagogical college. As will be observed below, Ân's story provides rare insights into the norms and expectations that have prevailed within Vietnam's educational sphere from the perspective of a policymaker's exceptionally interesting career path—a career path that began in obscurity in the context of Vietnam's wartime and post-war isolation, was shaped by Ân's continuous efforts to engage with and adapt ideas drawn from overseas to the Vietnam context, and which benefited from timely political, financial, and technical support from both domestic and foreign education sector stakeholders. As Ân began:

I've had a long career, and long process in education, from first studying pedagogy to now. To speak truthfully, I wanted nothing to do with pedagogy. After I finished high school, I laid at home for months because I didn't want to study pedagogy. I didn't take any exams. The authorities assigned me to [the pedagogical training college] based on my family's background, my mother and father, our context. I didn't want to go. I had my hopes, but I couldn't follow them. I wanted to take up studies in advanced math. My father was great at math. When I went into the teacher's training college, I did like the math pedagogy. And since going into pedagogical training my life has been close to education.

---

<sup>1</sup> Data for this section is drawn from the interview conducted with Đặng Tự Ân on 13 June 2022 in Hanoi.

After completing his degree in 1973 Ân, along with two other colleagues, was assigned responsibility to oversee the education of the province's<sup>2</sup> 23 top math students, a post he held for nine years. In 1982 he joined the province's Department of Education and Training (which the author visited 40 years later), where he was responsible for the province's math curriculum, overseeing a staff of more than 300 math teachers. In the late 1980s, when Vietnam faced international isolation and was among Asia's poorest countries, Ân and his colleagues formed a specialist school in math whose mission was to train the province's elite students. During this period Ân gained practice in research and adapting experimental teaching (more about which below). He would remain at the school until 1995.

In 1995, Ân was promoted to Vietnam's Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) where he found himself assigned with a wholly unfamiliar set of responsibilities: oversight of the education for poor, vulnerable, and orphaned children. As he explained:

From responsibility over the highest performing elite students in Hung Yen (province), I was at the ministry now responsible those at the lowest, near the bottom [of the system]: disadvantaged children: street children, orphans, and ethnic minority children. I never had any experience with these issues. But there was an element of luck, if I look at my career as a process. Because I would now have many different experiences and was able to develop a picture of the education system that was relatively more comprehensive than I had possessed before. I could see, for example, that up until 1990, education in Vietnam was weighed down by its focus on the mastery of traditional subjects and knowledge. To put it differently: the whole of northern Vietnam's education system, and then that of the south [after 1975], was focused on teaching elite kids and training them for the mathematics Olympiads. I remember I took a French professor of Math from University of Paris 5 on a one-week fieldtrip. We visited lots of schools in Hai Hung (Hung yen). A week later he told me: "It seems like all your schools are teaching preparations for the International Mathematical Olympiad, following the 'fathers' of your system: Russia and (East) Germany."

---

<sup>2</sup> At that time Hung Yen formed part of Hai Hung province.

He continued.

Yes, but I had my own perspective. A few years before that [when still working in Hung Yen] I found out about Polya's approach to teaching math,<sup>3</sup> his three books. I found out about it from a colleague who was a graduate student in Germany. And I discovered that I could approach math differently by training children's ability to think. My former students told me: 'I don't remember the lessons you taught, but the lessons for life you gave us: to resolve problems we would encounter afterwards.' Although Vietnam was still following the "train for the Olympiad" model, I kept my own approach throughout.

At MOET, Ân was ("luckily") assigned for a time to oversee the math curriculum at the primary school level, and continued to pursue his interest in thinking skills. Next, he was assigned to oversee a project on primary education for disadvantaged children. This was only focused on disadvantaged kids. "It was a huge program," he recalled, about \$300 million over 10 years, from 2002 to 2012. "I got to regularly meet with the embassies of 7 or 8 countries invested in the project. They would come to my office to talk every month, and I would take them on trips. They donated money, after all, and really were interested in disadvantaged kids. And I got to learn a lot from them" He continued:

After that, and through these projects, I continued to access information from overseas. Information in the country was still limited. And what happened from there is that we saw a process of renewal in education (in Vietnam) (*Đổi mới giáo dục*) take form through foreign projects, and this continued to grow until 2009-2010. Then we talked to the World Bank. They told us of a forum in Colombia with Vicky Colbert, the former vice-ministry of education in Colombia, who introduced EN, she did her thesis in America. She was having this forum in the Philippines. We went, with our vice-minister and some specialists, and we found it just wonderful (*cực kỳ hay*). First, it really agreed with my own thinking. Second, it made all of us realize our education system's limitations. We talked to (Colbert) and invited her to Vietnam. We organized a 20-day tour, with our vice minister, Nguyen Van Hien, education researchers, managers, and teachers, using project funds. In those 20 days we didn't hear many reports. Just

---

<sup>3</sup> George Polya's *How to Solve it: A new aspect of mathematical method*.

observed classes. She liked it.

In addition to the advantages and opportunities that foreign aid and expertise brought, Ân and his colleagues benefited from an additional and decisive advantage that seems essential to the success of any large-scale educational reform: timely and sustained political support from people in high places. As Ân relayed:

Well, luckily at that time, the Minister of Education, Professor Nguyễn Thiện Nhân, our minister, he was also the Vice Prime Minister. He was Vice-Prime Minister and also Education Minister. And he really liked reform. After listening to our report, he said: “Well let’s develop a large program and let’s do it. I’ll approve it!” At the time, the money in the old project was essentially done. I met with officials MOET. And then I was lucky enough to meet Suhas [Parandekar] of the World Bank. He helped us through the process of constructing the feasibility study.

Ân himself was the lead author of the feasibility study. And at this critical juncture, Ân and his colleagues’ efforts were assisted by two individuals. On the one hand was Nguyễn Thiện Nhân, then vice-prime minister and today a sitting member of Vietnam’s Politburo. Having Nhân’s support was vital. On the other, was Suhas Parandekar, a World Bank specialist with whom Ân would collaborate closely over seven years. Within Parandekar’s guidance, Ân proceeded to develop a feasibility study, following Parandekar’s advice to write it themselves, rather than hiring foreign experts. The basis for this decision was, on the one hand, the new program’s links to the former project, and on the other Parandekar’s insistence that this project would be Vietnam’s project.

### **3.2 The rise and fall and rise of VNEN**

Looking back, Ân recalled, the ideas in VNEN promised to change the nature and purpose of schools and a lot of people (in the sector) were excited. “I remember an official from an education management (from Nghe An, in Central Vietnam) stood up at the conference and said: ‘We’ve been ready to reform for a long time, but only with this VNEN

model do we know specifically how to reform. We want to train students capacity to think but only this model shows us how to do it.” Other support was forthcoming. Another participant, from Dong Nai (near Ho Chi Minh City) province shared, according to Ân: “Look, this program has very specific method— Teachers teach this way, teachers must guide students in this way, evaluate students in this way, cooperate with the community in this way. It is all specific.” Continued Ân, “It was not just theoretical. Of course, you need the theory. But if you haven’t put it to practice in your own country is another matter.”

In 2011 and 2012, as the program moved from feasibility to piloting in six provinces across the country, Ân benefited (again) from the resources the project brought and a very specific dynamic it permitted to take shape: Namely, that Ân and the designers of VNEN got to travel to districts and schools and work directly with frontline teaching staff to support them in using the materials. As Ân recalled, this was the first time this had ever happened in Vietnam. It was wholly different from the normal bureaucratic process, which was indirect and inevitably created problems.

Recalled Ân: “I remember how moved I was. When we visited a remote region, the (female) teachers were so happy to see us. ‘I’ve known you for a time from these (curricular) guides,’ said one teacher. But now we get to meet you in person.” Later, when the VNEN model was brought to scale, this kind of interaction could not be achieved. Still, Ân credits this close interaction in the piloting phase as crucial, as it permitted a process of collaboration and iterative adaptation, where education system stakeholders could figure out what worked best to inform the final program’s design. Ân and his colleagues travelled throughout the country holding sessions, and eventually, as reported in the previous section, local authorities in the pilot provinces themselves began training. “So,” recalled Ân, “through these interactions, our understanding of VNEN was deep as was the understanding of those putting into use.” “The only thing was that it was expensive. Very expensive. Lots of costs. But



Suhas [Parandekar] said: ‘You have the money, and you should do it.’ We had two thirds of teachers in the districts we visited attending out trainings. After the program, we lost this element and the problems we expected to occur began to emerge.”

As the VNEN project was scaled up, perhaps inevitably, its impacts and local practices varied and elicited very different kinds of responses. In some areas, according to friendly and hostile critics, the VNEN model was introduced too mechanically, as has been related in detail by Le (2018a, 2018b). At one point, a senior MOET official in the Department of Primary Education reportedly forbade teachers employing the VNEN method from doing any conventional lecturing in class.<sup>4</sup> In some provinces and districts, teachers and students were said to have not understood its objectives. In these instances, the results of the new school model were viewed unfavorably, including by parents, whose children were now being educated in a format wholly alien to them. In some localities and, more damagingly, on a national scale—through the internet, VNEN was the subject of bad press and public scorn, often by commentators with no background in pedagogical matters. Here, the project and its supporters found themselves scrambling to respond to critics, Ân and numerous other interview respondents noted.

Initially, MOETs plan was to continue to expand VNEN up until 2018 and beyond, after which the new (VNEN-informed) curricular (NGEC) would be rolled out. But by 2016, the VNEN name— if not the program’s aims and achievements, came under intense pressure in the policy and public discourse, at which point education Minister Trần Xuân Nhạ decided to make adoption of the VNEN model strictly voluntary. Specifically, MOET stopped providing financial support for VNEN stipulating, however, that the VNEN curricula and textbooks

---

<sup>4</sup> This was repeated to the author my multiple sources. The name of the MOET official and the sources are not disclosed for concerns of privacy.

would be retained, revised, and made available as part of the New Education Curriculum, starting with Grade 1 in the 2018-2019 academic year.

While VNEN was damaged in the press, its impacts would be far ranging. Following MOET's decision to make the program voluntary, some provinces and schools dropped out. But the majority continued to draw on the program's fundamental elements. For VNEN's architects, there was a conscious decision to cease endless arguments in the press and observe how VNEN was being practiced on a large scale. Indeed, as will be discussed later, fundamental elements of VNEN were duly incorporated into the NGEC, including VNEN's focus on student-centered learning capabilities and its focus on content and methods that seek to align learning objectives with content, instruction, and evaluation.

### **3.3 Policy Entrepreneurship and Adoption: The importance of agency**

Although education policymakers in Vietnam took an interest in pedagogical reforms as early as the late 1980s, it was not until 2009 that the country embraced a bold experiment: to pilot and expand to scale a new curricular and pedagogical approach drawn from foreign sources and adapted to conditions in Vietnam. While the history and legacies of VNEN are larger than any single person, it is nonetheless the case that, as with "audacious reforms" in other contexts, curricular and pedagogical reforms in the form of VNEN was an instance of policy entrepreneurship, with Đặng Tự Ân playing a pivotal role. At its early stages, VNEN's emergence owed to policy entrepreneurship and innovation driven by individuals equipped with ideas, and timely political and financial support from career education bureaucrats and national political leaders willingness to adopt and adapt audacious reforms.

Crucially, Ân's personal efforts to explore educational approaches in other countries and his active engagement with international organizations provided Vietnam an opportunity to experiment with new ideas. Crucially, again, Ân and VNEN received timely political support

not only in a sympathetic vice-minister, but also in a Minister of Education who was simultaneously a vice-Prime Minister and future Politburo member. This political support and pipeline to the Party Central Committee and Politburo were essential in an additional sense. It is notable that the adoption and development of VNEN from 2009, and diffusion of its approach preceded and contributed to CPV elites' subsequent embrace of "comprehensive educational reforms" endorsed by the party in 2013 as Party Resolution 29.

#### 4. FROM MICRO-COHERENCE TO COHERENCE GAPS: PROBLEMS IN SCALING UP

So far, this essay has established the context of pedagogical and curricular reforms in Vietnam. It has then sought to provide a more granular or "street level" view of the circumstances of VNEN's adaptation to the Vietnam context through the experiences of one of its key architects. Extending the concept of system coherence from learning drawn from recent literature on education systems (Pritchett 2015), this section traces the evolution of the VNEN project from its adoption, through to its piloting, and subsequent scaling up. Taking this approach, the discussion below offers a conceptual interpretation of VNEN and the conditions that permitted and limited its effectiveness. The discussion proceeds from an analysis of VNEN's inception, adoption, and piloting on to its implementation at scale. It concludes with a presentation of critical perspectives on VNEN which provide important insights as to what went wrong but which also risk understating the reforms longer term impacts.

##### 4.1 The Genesis of VNEN

While domestic critics of Vietnam's education system had long-called reform since the mid 1990s, and while CPV leaders routinely noted shortcomings in the education

system's performance around learning and skilling, breakthrough progress toward new understandings of education and (later) a new education model came only by 2009.

International engagement, foreign aid, and foreign expertise were key. Over the course of the 1990s Vietnam actively developed and benefited from close relations with international development agencies such as the World Bank, UNDP, and Asian Development Bank.

Between 2003 and 2013, Vietnam received some \$300 million of ODA support for education reforms, much of it geared toward improving the education system's reach and strengthening the quality of education. Of this, 258.6 million went to the Primary Education for Disadvantaged Children Project (PEDC), of which \$60 million was funded through grants from the UK, Australia, Canada, and Norway (IEG 2012). In interviews with policy makers, respondents recalled how participation in these projects and dialogues around them were crucial in crystalizing awareness of possible routes for undertaking curricular and pedagogical reforms aimed at improving the quality of instruction and improving learning and skilling outcomes (Bodewig et al, *ibid*). VNEN germinated in this context.

#### *4.1.1 Acting on the reform imperative*

By the turn of the century, a small number of policymakers in MOET took an increasing interest in adopting progressive, student-centered approaches to teaching and learning. Within this group, there was special interest in the need to shift from a focus on knowledge development to the comprehensive development of students' capabilities. Nor was this development limited to MOET. In the upper reaches of the CPV itself, new approaches to teaching and learning were seen as essential, suggesting that the scope of education reforms needed would have to be comprehensive. However, how to do so was unknown. By the year 2000, the country lacked even a single expert with relevant experience. And many reform-minded policymakers simply lacked an understanding of where to begin.

Independent research and exposure to ideas in international ideas through engagement with the donor community proved crucial. As Đặng Tự Ân recalled in an email communication, “many of us took an interest in foreign ideas as in Vietnam we lacked materials that could help us.”

#### *4.1.2 The evolution and scaling of a large-scale project*

In 2009 and 2010, facilitated by opportunities created by the World Bank, Đặng Tự Ân and others in MOET began taking an active interest in the EN model and gained exposure to the model at a conference in the Philippines. A Vietnamese delegation then travelled to Colombia to gain more direct knowledge. Subsequently, Ân and his team worked with the World Bank to adapt the model to Vietnam, as will be explored in the subsequent section. The VNEN project was funded by the Global Partnership for Education (GPE) through the World Bank. UNESCO in Vietnam was the monitoring and coordinating agency with dozens of bilateral educational development partners taking an interest. The total aid package was \$84.6 million (GPE 2013). The feasibility study and piloting took place between 2010 and 2012. Widescale implementation followed piloting in 24 primary schools and 48 lower-secondary schools in the 2011-2012 school year in 12 districts in 6 provinces.<sup>5</sup> By the end of the project, VNEN included some 4,800 primary schools (i.e. 32% of total number of schools nationwide) and 1,500 lower secondary schools (i.e. 14% of total number of schools nationwide).

VNEN in Vietnam can be seen to have three periods: A period of exploration and piloting, a period of project implementation that began in January of 2013 and extended until

---

<sup>5</sup> These included Lao Cai, Hoa Binh, Ha Giang, Kon Tum, Dak Lak and Khanh Hoa provinces.

June, 2016, and a period of post-project diffusion. The phased approach to VNEN was not a happenstance, and is crucial to understanding the successes and complications that ensued as the project evolved. By design, the project was laid out with the explicit aim of achieving variable levels of coverage across provinces according to socioeconomic conditions. Its aim was to achieve high coverage in poorer northern and central highlands provinces. Whereas in middle-income provinces, VNEN was to be implemented in selected districts. In the wealthiest provinces, coverage was limited to one demonstration school. As Parandekar et al. (2017) explain, the idea had been to generate awareness and “buzz” without resources for an immediately nationally scaled program. This was an approach drawn from research on complex systems (Holland 1992, 1995), wherein progressive, system-changing growth occurs through cycles of feedback and, in which, the feedback process identifies “strange attractors” that already exist, in the case of an education system, over geographical units.

#### 4.1.3 Objectives and key elements

The project’s goal was to build and scale a new school-focused model with a focus on innovative teaching and learning methods, classroom organization, assessment of student trends, and community involvement. Distinctive elements of VNEN can be gleaned from the following description of VNEN methods of instruction and features of VNEN classrooms.<sup>6</sup> Drawing from EN, the VNEN schools would feature a student-centred, team-based, problem driven mode of instruction and learning. Instead of sitting in rows facing the teacher to be lectured to [reminiscent of the situation represented in the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*<sup>7</sup>]

---

<sup>6</sup> This account is drawn from GPE 2013.

<sup>7</sup> Freire, Paulo [1970 (September 2000)]. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (30th anniversary ed.). New York. Bloomsbury.

students were instead seated in groups of four to six students at tables, while the teacher circulates and talks amongst the groups. In a conventional class, only a small number would be accorded leadership roles and addressed mainly administrative matters and orderliness. By contrast, VNEN classrooms, through small group peer-learning and problem solving, afforded all students to gain confidence and play proactive roles in discussion, schoolwork, and learning.

Rather than emphasizing rote memorization through the study and recitation and information and models of how to do things right, emphasis in the VNEN classroom was on cultivating students' capacities as thinkers. And to promote initiative, creativity, self-esteem, self-reliance, responsibility, social skills, and communication skills. Its aim was to expand learning opportunities within the school and through the school's interaction with its local social environment. This was reflected, first, in VNEN classrooms, which teacher and students transformed from dull rooms with barren walls to lively, multipurpose learning spaces. VNEN classrooms were colorful and festooned with the students' own work for all in the class and school community to view. Rather than closed and gated spaces where parents rarely tread, the VNEN schools are designed to elicit community participation and, within the classrooms, students were given opportunities to engage in collective decision making.

The VNEN approach required major changes in teachers themselves and in schools and their leadership. According to the program's design, teachers were to be guided and motivated through information sharing sessions at the district and school level. The program also included mechanisms to motivate and support low-performing teachers. Across the country, schools implementing VNEN exhibited great enthusiasm. (The subsequent section of the paper describes how these sessions unfolded in practice.) Though the project required major changes in teaching and learning activities, schools involved in the project embraced it. Experiences in Lao Cai, a poor province bordering China and with a large ethnic minority

population, were indicative of schools where VNEN's impacts were transformative, as an assessment from the province's Department of Education (DOET) explained:

Many administrators and teachers are passionate about the new model, and have even researched and innovated themselves, treating it as an important and successful step in their careers and in the sector. The most obvious results are as follows: Students who were dependent on teachers are now more independent, bold, confident, and excited to learn, and their learning results are better. Thanks to slower-paced learning, teachers have more time to pay attention to weak students, helping to reduce the percentage of weak students. For ethnic minority students, [the program] offered chances to participate in many activities and communicate (listen and speak) with friends in Vietnamese, and their Vietnamese learning results are more advanced. In particular, the new School Model has fundamentally changed the pedagogical activities of the school in the direction of self-discipline, self-management, democratization, and formation of necessary competencies and qualities of Vietnamese citizens.<sup>8</sup>

A key aspect of the VNEN model was transforming modes of assessment with an emphasis on surveying students' achievements. This entailed adopting new ways of working with students. Teachers implemented guidelines for measuring reading speed, writing speed, and calculation speed according to skills standards and to employ checklists to assess reading and writing ability of students in grades 1, 2, 3.

#### *3.1.4 Implementation, in theory*

At the local level (province level) and below, implementation followed a standard procedure, even as implementation experiences varied across and within provinces owing to the interests and capabilities of various stakeholders (more about which below). Challenges encountered included the conditions of schools relative to the equipment and materials needed, difficulties owing to economic and geographical conditions, and challenges of

---

<sup>8</sup> Reference



adapting curricula to ethnic minority students, even as the program has been seen to have been particularly effective in ethnic minority contexts (as reported below).

Implementation would be overseen locally by provincial Departments of Education and Training (DOETs) who advised the Provincial People's Committees to issue guiding documents and implement the new school model and to officially establish a Project Management Board of the “New Primary School Model” following specific regulations. The DOETS role in directing the implementation of projects emphasized professional training and the provision of timely support for schools in the implementation process. DOETs and schools were tasked to regularly review and summarize developments across key dimensions (e.g., teaching) at the school and district levels, to evaluate and assess the results achieved, and to formulate plans to address challenges for the subsequent academic year.

One of the successes in implementing the New School Model was seen in the area of replication. Lao Cai province, a recognized leader in implementing the model is exemplary. Schools in the province shared and exchanged experiences in events facilitated by District and Province-level education authorities while also actively welcoming delegations of managers and teachers from other provinces to visit, learn and share experiences. By March 2016, schools in the province had welcomed 115 delegations and over 4000 people. Collaborating with Lao Cai, MOET videotaped 20 lessons conducted by the province’s best teachers and the videos became a main source of material for trainers at central, provincial, and school levels in 63 provinces. In addition, Lao Cai DOET staff and teachers designed a Vietnamese language lesson on their own accord, using VNEN methods. DOET staff in Lao Cai worked with schools to change the perception of new model and facilitated dissemination to the secondary school level.

Another striking feature of the policy was its emphasis on iterative adaptation and proactive diffusion of best practices. Through practice, education administrators, schools, and

teachers practice in the program clarified emerging challenges, discovered new techniques, provided each other support, and created new content (e.g., new examples, to motivate teaching). During the implementation process, DOET, BOET, and schools used preliminary (mid-year), final reviews, and periodic reviews to motivate, encourage, and reward schools and individuals with outstanding achievements. Several principles used Principals' Clubs to share, connect and support schools. In many provinces, DOET established “core groups” of competent practitioners at provincial, district, and school levels to oversee planning, training, technical support, and on-site consultation. In Lao Cai province, for example, this core group comprised 40 persons well trained in VNEN methods. MOET provided funds for the team to conduct trainings in Ha Giang, Lai Chau, Thanh Hoa, Nghe An, Dak Lak, Vinh Long, and Ca Mau provinces and in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City.

#### **4.2 Implementation and coherence gaps at scale**

The VNEN project was valued at \$85 million and was undertaken over the course of three years. But as has been related above, the conception, planning, and piloting phases of the project – unfolding between 2009 and 2012, prior to its scaling up – were extraordinary and are worthy of explicit attention. Effective management and iterative adaptation of the model at the grassroots was facilitated by the effective use of information and communication, and extensive support. A key strength of VNEN, particularly in its piloting and diffusion, was the effective sharing of information. Information collected and shared and used for policy adjustment during the program’s implementation went well beyond such “thin” forms of information as summary data on the numbers of provinces, schools, and classrooms involved; the VNEN project, with its emphasis on continuous assessment of student and teacher performance, provided the kinds of “thick” information necessary for program staff to direct timely support and motivation to lower-performing classrooms. As

discussed above, in its piloting phase, ample project funding permitted Ân and his colleagues to work directly with those putting the model into practice, allowing the designer and user of the material to meet directly. A potential downside, remarked Ân, is that it was “very expensive.” He added, however, that the Bank encouraged him to do what was needed, since he had the money. In retrospect, while \$85 million is a substantial figure, it was a modest figure for its long-term contributions to Vietnam’s education system.

The scaling up of the project in 2013 marked a major turn. In 2013 the VNEN model was implemented in 1,447 schools across all of Vietnam’s 63 provinces and cities divided into 3 groups: In 20 provinces in disadvantaged areas with 1,143 schools; in 21 provinces middle-income provinces with 282 schools; and in 22 wealthier provinces and cities with 22 schools. Subsequent years saw expansion beyond the schools initially included in the project on a voluntary basis – i.e., without financial support from the project. By 2016, some 4,177 schools had adopted VNEN (including 1,700 lower secondary schools), accounting for nearly a third of the country’s schools at the primary and lower-secondary level.

But scaling posed problems. One of the most prominent complaints that took place in this process that VNEN was being implemented too mechanically and rigidly, and that some “hardliners” in MOET’s department of primary education took an “extreme” approach, such as forbidding teachers from lecturing at all (cf Le 2018b, 2018b). Despite these problems as a large-scale project, VNEN was brought to scale following a well-developed structure with clear objectives and benchmarks, as well as linkages between the delegated tasks, finance, information, support, and motivation.

While the VNEN project sought to impact the system, it was focused on achieving a particular transformation in schools and in teachers, one school at a time; in districts and district education systems, one district at a time, and so on, on a gradually increasing scale. Assisting provinces, districts, schools, and teachers to successfully adopt new teaching and

learning practice, required coordinated action across different levels of public authority. While local actors were given latitude to adapt practices to specific needs, the VNEN framework was formally “coherent for learning” in the sense that its design featured multiple relations of accountability that compelled stakeholders – from MOET, the provinces, the districts, schools, teachers, and even members of communities – to collaborate, report, monitor, and feedback. When things went well, and when they didn’t, the program structure facilitated feedback to guide efforts at corrective measures. Delegation of responsibilities was in principle clear at the province level and below.

Adopting, piloting, and scaling up VNEN was a large-scale undertaking involving a wide range of actors in a socio-political and cultural context not always open to new ideas. From the beginning, the success of VNEN depended on clear communication of new ideas and persistent efforts to inform, motivate, and inspire schools, teachers, children, and communities. VNEN was most effective when its practitioners effectively communicated the origins and purpose of the reform and its expected benefits and specified to stakeholders (including schools and frontline teachers) what would be required for successful implementation. In Vietnam, a country with a history of effective mass communication and mobilization, MOET and local authorities organized numerous “propaganda activities” targeting parents, students, and the community about the new school model.

VNEN’s design recognized the importance of achieving clarity of communication and forming a consensus as to delegated tasks among province-level People’s committees, province-level Departments of Education and Training, (district level) Bureaus of Education and Training, as well as participating primary (and, later) secondary schools.

### **4.3 The last word on VNEN?**

For a program that was widely embraced, and which has cemented a lasting impact (more about which below), the end of the VNEN project, in 2016, saw the program's reputation badly tarnished by a combination of shortcomings with its scaling up and explosive negative press attention that, in turn, elicited interventions from outside the education sector in some provinces. In some provinces, the energy and effort and resources that attended the project's initial implementation faded and with it, support and encouragement for schools and teachers using the curriculum. In some localities and schools, the VNEN program was implemented haphazardly or rigidly (more about which below), or without success. In such localities and schools, confusion about the curriculum and its goals drew the ire of teachers and parents. Frequently, instances, complaints filtered up through provincial People's Councils (formally representative bodies that act as "the eyes and ears" for the executive People's Committees), spurring some provincial People's Committee to abruptly suspend participation in the program altogether. In several, provinces, political leaders (e.g., the president of the People's Committee) intervened in the day to day administration of the education sector, effectively puncturing the accountability relations between local education agencies and VNEN policy advisors in Hanoi, who were duly incensed.

In 2015 through to 2017 (after the project itself ended), several extremely negative and inaccurate accounts of VNEN appeared in online publications, including Giaoduc.net.vn. One of the most damaging and widely read articles, written by an influential professor without background in education or familiarity with VNEN asserted that no one who studied EN in Colombia ever made it into a university. While this claim could not be verified, analyses of EN in Colombia found that the project was chronically underfunded and under-resourced and did not result in clear changes in teaching practices (Mcewan and Benveniste

2003, cited in Le 2018a). Bad press and heated critiques appeared to damage the VNEN brand.

Critical analyses of VNEN can also be found in the scholarly literature. In a series of outstanding critical analysis, Le (2018a, 2018b, 2020) has presented a well-argued critique of some of the reform's weaknesses. At a global level, the overarching theme of her critique is that VNEN's problems stemmed from its overly mechanical transfer to and enforcement of "best practices" to the Vietnam context. Drawing connections between VNEN and historical examples of policy transfer, Le characterizes the keen interest of Vietnam's policymakers in foreign models as a manifestation of coloniality (Le 2020:457) or, alternatively, the search for a "magic bullet," in the form of foreign (and especially Western) models that can address the country's needs. Vietnam's integration into the world market over the course of the last three decades and the associated inflow of ODA into the country Vietnam indeed experienced historically unprecedented opportunities for various policy transfer initiatives, many of which brought funding. This openness and interest in foreign projects, she notes, was reflected in the Education Strategic Development Plan of 2011-2022, which identified internationalization across a range of policy areas, and in the prominence of Western-educated education sector leaders (and later politburo member) Nguyen Thien Nhan.

With respect to the adoption, adaptation, and implementation of VNEN, Le's analysis is more specific. While noting that Vietnam's education policymakers were indeed enthused about the EN model (not least because it draws on many western ideas), she also quotes one policymaker critical of VNEN (and not involved in the program) who suggested that policymakers chose EN to signal to Western donors their willingness to follow endorsed practices and win large-scale funding (p. 460). More broadly, Le observes how the complex power-dynamics and asymmetries of resources and technical knowledge shaped Vietnam's reform process and education reforms within it. At a macro level, this is consistent with the

Globally Structured Educational Agenda body of theoretical literature that construes policy transfer as part of relations of domination and exploitation (Dale 2000). In this view, the EN model was less a case of South-South policy transfer and more one of North-South-South policy transfer (Le 2018b) and even an instance of fast policy, a term used, inter alia, by Peck and Theodore (2015) to describe the diffusion of neoliberal practices. In this connection EN could be seen as an attractive model for transfer because of its low-cost and replicability. Here, EN and VNEN are cast as a trojan horse for lowering teacher-to-student ratios. Le is especially critical of the global promotion of “best practices” by international donors who cast these as instances of “south-south” transfer while conveniently eliding concerns about inequality and presenting education as a purely technical rather than political issues (2018a:10).

The greatest contribution of Le’s work on VNEN is her critical analysis of problems in the policy’s roll out. Examining the implementation of VNEN as a qualitative vertical case study, Le (2018a, 2018b) points out multiple problems that emerged in implementation. Specifically, Le avers, the techno-rational mindset of local stakeholders— including well-meaning policy makers, practitioners, and teachers, whose perception of VNEN as an international ‘best practice’ model led them to take a highly rigid approach to implementing it. As a result, some aspects of VNEN as it was implemented at scale actually negated the principles and practices that informed the original model. For example, rather than encouraging greater teacher autonomy, active learning, and localization, the implementation of VNEN often tended to perpetuate rigidity, conformity, and textbook dependency – in effect reproducing key aspects of the discredited pedagogical practices VNEN was supposed to replace. Thus, in some instances, longstanding systems of reasoning “survived” the implementation of VNEN, effectively repackaging ineffective practices under the banner of global ‘best practices.’

As Le relates, in November and December of 2015, *Giaoduc.net*, an online publication, ran a series of opinion pieces that were highly critical of the project. These stories created a public uproar, leading to animated debates in the National Assembly. As a 2017 account titled “The last word on VNEN,” which sought to put distance between VNEN and subsequent reform efforts put it: “Perhaps there has never been a project or model that has been put to the test and deployed in schools in Vietnam that has consumed as much media (paper and ink) coverage as VNEN (Nguyen D.A 2017).”<sup>9</sup> That was six years ago. What now, should be make of Vietnam’s VNEN experience?

## 5. ASPECTS OF COHERENCE AND ITERATIVE ADAPTATION?

Studies concerned to establish VNEN’s impacts on learning in the short-term risk missing its broader and possible more significant impacts on the evolution of Vietnam’s education system. It is my contention that, despite and perhaps even in part owing to particular nature of the difficulties that emerged in its implication and the controversies it generated, the impacts of what I will call Vietnam’s “VNEN experience” are greater than is widely understood. Placed in a broad perspective, including an appreciation of the disruptive effects of the COVID pandemic on learning, what matters most about Vietnam’s VNEN experience is not the presence or absence of near-term measurable effects on learning outcomes. Rather, it is the catalyzing effects the reforms had on ideas and practices and around curricular development and teaching practices. Overall, its numerous difficulties notwithstanding, VNEN catalyzed the uptake and proliferation of system-altering changes in curricula, pedagogical practices, and learning that have helped to transform Vietnam’s education system for the better. Most concretely, the uptake of VNEN provided Vietnam with experience that is proving advantageous in system-wide curricular and pedagogical reforms.

---

<sup>9</sup> “Có lẽ không có một dự án, mô hình nào được đưa vào thử nghiệm, triển khai tại các trường học ở Việt Nam lại tốn nhiều giấy mực của giới truyền thông như VNEN



To give one concrete example, across Vietnam's 63 provinces, schools and teachers with VNEN experience are at the forefront of assisting inexperienced schools and colleagues in the adoption of the new nation-wide curricula that contain many elements central to VNEN.

### **5.1 Efforts to establish VNEN's short term impacts**

The VNEN project was large in scale and its precise impacts on teaching and learning are difficult to ascertain. In its own assessment, the World Bank (Parandekar et al. 2017) concluded that the program had a "positive" impact on children's cognitive and noncognitive achievement, based on the Bank's research following a cohort of 10,000 VNEN students from Grade 3 through to Grade 5 compared to a counterfactual (i.e., non-VNEN) group of the same size to see the difference in growth. The Bank also indicated and emphasized the program's cost effectiveness, which directly benefited more than half a million children over four years at the rate of US\$40 per student per year, as compared to the PPP \$1,000 per year average per student expenditure for primary education. A more recent study (Dang et al. 2022) suggests contributions to learning have been modest.

Dang, Glewwe, and Lee (2022) evaluate how VNEN affected students' cognitive (mathematics and Vietnamese) and non-cognitive (socioemotional) skills through a propensity score matching method aimed at estimating short-term (1-3 years) and long-term (5-7 years) effects. Here, VNEN's impacts would appear modest. Specifically, they find the effects on students' cognitive skills are small in the short-term, and are larger for boys, ethnic minorities, and students in Northern Vietnam. With respect to non-cognitive skills, they find the VNEN program modestly increased primary school students' skills in the short-term, with sizable and significant effects with respect to ethnic minority students, with little gender difference. In their study, long-term impacts are less precisely estimated, but appear to fade away, showing little or no impact of the VNEN program on cognitive skills, with little

variation by gender or geographical region. The program's impacts on non-cognitive skills also seem to have dissipated in the long-term.

Addressing the efficacy of teachers employing VNEN inspired methods in the classroom, DeJaeghere, Duong, and Dao (2021) note the difficulty of drawing conclusions from standards, as most teachers in Vietnam meet high standards of education, knowledge, and professionalism. In their research, they contend that improving teacher quality and high learning outcomes in schools that follow the program needs to rest on careful analysis of teaching practices in the classroom. Through observations of classrooms in 20 schools across ten provinces, their research sought to identify specific ways students learn to think and employ strategies in their learning. They found that the most effective teachers were those most effective in teaching “metacognitive knowledge and strategies” to students, i.e., working with students to think about their learning process (ibid 2). Their research reported that teachers believed all students (except, according to some, ethnic minorities) could learn higher order concepts through meta-cognitive teaching. Effective teachers combined lecturing and direct teacher-student interaction with student-peer learning and formative assessment.

## **5.2 VNEN and the National General Education Curriculum**

Despite certain setbacks in the concluding years of its implementation, the impacts of VNEN have been far-reaching, including its contribution to a national debate on how pedagogy and curricula should be governed. Through the firsthand practice it afforded provinces, schools, and teachers with new approaches to teaching and learning, and through its direct and indirect influence on key aspects of the 2018 NGEC and teacher training, VNEN has undoubtedly transformed teaching and learning in Vietnam's general education system. Across the country, and despite damage to the VNEN brand in social media, Vietnam's schools increasingly employ aspects of VNEN through the NGEC.

As Nguyen Minh Thuyet, architect of the NGEC, and Dang Thi Thanh Huyen, former director of the National Institute for Educational Management relayed to the author in separate interviews,<sup>10</sup> many aspects of VNEN and the NGEC can be found in general global movements in the field of curriculum and pedagogy. Nonetheless, the evolution and implementation of VNEN, despite its various problems, was the first trial of these curricular and pedagogical elements at scale. These similarities can be seen in comparison of the two programs (VNEN and NGEC) with respect to teaching and methods.

For VNEN’s architects, the 2018 NGEC (MOET 2018) draws on VNEN in following specific respects: Its focus on developing students capacities for learning; its embrace of the four pillars of the VNEN, including the structuring of teaching and learning around Objectives, Content, Methods and Assessment; the structure and formation of textbooks and lesson plans; the adoption of teaching techniques and educational content meant to make education more meaningful and relevant to student’s lives and experiences; the focus on developing “soft“ and not only “hard” skills for learners; the focus on teaching people, and not just teaching words, and on delivering education for “both hemispheres of the brain.” For VNEN’s architects, the entire VNEN project is seen retrospectively as a system-transforming process of piloting, testing, and scaling up new pedagogical practices and curricula for later incorporation and implementation through the NGEC. Anecdotal evidence supports this view. In an interview with the Department of Education in Ân’s home province of Hung Yen conducted in June of 2022, the Department’s Director indicated that, to prepare the province

---

<sup>10</sup> Interviews with Nguyen Minh Thuyet and Dang Thi Thanh Huyen were conducted by the author in Hanoi in August 2018. The author conducted a follow-up interview with Fang Thi Thanh Huyen in August 2022.

for the rollout of the NGEC, hundreds of teachers with experience with the VNEN model would provide support for those with no experience.<sup>11</sup>

Beyond the NGEC, VNEN's legacy is seen in its promotion of a rhetoric of progress with respect to school management and administration. According to this rhetoric, the NGEC expands opportunities to enhance workplace democracy and autonomy, make more effective use of local resources, creativity, and interest in the input and output and assessment of schools around learning. For example, today's NGEC offers an expanded element of choice, wherein local education authorities (at the province, district, and school levels) can select among curricular content and methods that they find most suitable. Assisting schools to become more autonomous and capable organizations is now seen as a vital challenge.

## **5.2 Supporting schools to be more autonomous adaptive organizations**

Led by an education system veteran who once loathed the very prospect of studying pedagogy, the adoption and wide implementation of VNEN and the subsequent incorporation of many of its elements into systemwide curricular and pedagogical was a large-scale and in respects messy process—albeit one that has important and in respects positive impacts on Vietnam's education system. This is seen in the relation between VNEN and Vietnam's new national curriculum.

Having finished his time in the education bureaucracy, Ân's career has entered a new phase—as managing director of a state-linked but autonomous and non-profit organization, the Vietnam Innovation for General Education Foundation (VIGEF). Together with its chairperson, former Vice-Minister of Education, Nguyen Vinh Hien, the Foundation's

---

<sup>11</sup> Interview Nguyen Van Phe, Director of Department of Education, Hung Yen province 14 June 2022, 307 Nguyen Van Linh.

mission it to promote equitable, high-quality, and effective general education for all in Vietnam. Their vision is an organization that can support local schools and school systems in developing their capabilities for formulating and carrying out school development plans; managing teaching and student educational activities; increasing the effectiveness of human resource use and administrative and financial management; achieving more effective management of facilities, equipment, and technology; use of technology in teaching and learning; and improving educational quality. These were precisely the aims of a project the Foundation undertook in Lao Cai province which, it may be recalled, was among the first provinces to embrace VNEN.

In interview's Ân discussed his vision of nurturing the development of Foundation chapters in Vietnam's provinces, with a particular focus on assisting public schools become effective organizations. According to this conception, to be effective, Vietnam's education system needs to move away from a model and a culture of large-scale top-down bureaucratic management (*quản lý*) to a more decentralized system of small-scale single-organization management (*quản trị*). Operating on a modest budget of donations from international organizations and Vietnam businesses, VIGEF aims to develop into an effective player in Vietnam's education ecosystem and a force supporting the transformation of local education systems and schools across the country.

### **5.3 An instance of messy problem-driven iterative adaption?**

The events and processes recounted in this essay trace Vietnam's movement toward pedagogies and curricula aimed at enhancing and continuously expanding students' capacity to learn independently through guidance, self-exploration, collaboration, and critical reflection. That Vietnam's movement in this latter direction has been arduous and halting, and remains incomplete, is hardly surprising, as it entailed confronting the limitations of entrenched approaches to education training that prevailed for decades and even centuries. In

any setting, overcoming the preferences, habits, and mental frames of elite politicians, education managers, and the public as it concerns conceptions about learning is formidably difficult. There is, in addition, the challenge of working with frontline education staff who have themselves been trained and steeped in the ways of the past and who, consequently, must be persuaded to embrace and invest in a new paradigm. Through the process of its piloting and roll-out, those overseeing VNEN had to confront the gaps between a loose blueprint and the necessity to adapt the program's through numerous iterations. At scale, the tendency of central-level bureaucrats to insist on rigid, mechanical instructions produced unsurprisingly poor results. Some of the toughest critiques, including those that suggested VNEN was adopted mainly as a means to access development funds and then, ironically enough, was implemented in a way that reinforced rather than relaxed rigidities.

Without denying these problems, this essay has sought to peer into Vietnam's VNEN experience by examining the experiences of reformers involved in its iterative adaptation and, in so doing, to shed light on the interplay of agency and structure prior to, during, and after its piloting and implementation at scale. It has represented Ân's personal journey and his roles in policy adoption and implementation as thread from the 1950s and 1960s through to the present day, shedding light on Vietnam's education system and the conditions under which efforts at improving its performance around learning have succeed and failed, and why. In Ân's case it was, at first glance, a combination of intellectual curiosity, motivation, timely political and financial support, patience and resilience, and effective communication that proved decisive. As for the bigger picture of system coherence, VNEN shows how engagement in the international education research community and the adoption of foreign supported schemes to enhance learning can effect importance changes, but that reforms' effectiveness depends on context-specific dynamics, such as properties of education systems

and their social embedding— which always shape and mediate how policies are put into practice.

The case of VNEN shows us, among other things, that ideas and knowledge of best practices are never alone decisive. Ultimately, it is ideas and individual and collective action that decide history. The perception of VNEN as an unsuccessful project is misleading. Many of its impacts on teaching and learning have been positive, profound, and systemwide. Perhaps most notably, its early implementation and subsequent scaling up were, at times, attended by the emergence of multiple multi-directional accountabilities that enhanced children to learn. Political commitment from the arena of elite politics gave education sector managers confidence and focus in designing and implementing the project while the project's resources and incremental roll-out permitted continuous communication between project designers and schools implementing VNEN. Ironically, controversies that emerged in the course of implementing VNEN resulted in an important system-wide change in the form of a government decree (127/2018/NĐ-CP) that forbids local (province and district) authorities from intervening in educational matters (e.g., curricular and pedagogical matters). Experience under VNEN, despite difficulties, also afforded schools and staff with direct experience in implementing new curricular and approaches to teaching. In interviews conducted in 2022 in Ân's home province of Hung Yen<sup>12</sup>, the director and staff of the province's Department of Education spoke of their current efforts to implement current curricular reforms, and how these benefitted massively from the experience of half of the province's teaching staff.

While VNEN is but one reform in a specific setting, its evolution and impacts invite comparison small- and large-scale policy interventions in other countries. The emergence and

---

<sup>12</sup> Interview with the Director of Hung Yen province, 15 June 2022.

adoption of VNEN, its successes and setbacks in its piloting phases scaling up and, not least, the successes and problems encountered in communicating its goals resemble aspects of problem driven iterative adaptive learning (Andrews et al 2013) and this, in turn, invites further analysis.



## REFERENCES

- Andrews, M., Pritchett, L. and Woolcock, M., 2013. Escaping capability traps through problem driven iterative adaptation (PDIA). *World Development*, 51, pp.234-244.
- Attfield, I., & Vu, B. T. (2013). A rising tide of primary school standards—The role of data systems in improving equitable access for all to quality education in Vietnam. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 33, 74–87.  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2012.02.003>.
- Atkinson, R. 1998. *The life story interview*. Thousand Oaks, Calif. ; London: SAGE.
- Bodewig, Christian, Reena Badiani-Magnusson, Kevin Macdonald, David Newhouse and Jan Rutkowski. 2014. *Skilling Up Vietnam: Preparing the Workforce for a Modern Market Economy*. Washington, D.C.: World Bank.
- Creswell, John W. "SAGE Research Methods SAGE Handbook of Mixed Methods in Social & Behavioral Research." (2010).
- CPV 2013. Communist Party of Vietnam Resolution 29 on Fundamental and comprehensive innovation of education and training, meeting the requirements of industrialization, modernization in in the context of a and socialist market economy and international integration. *Nghị Quyết 29 TW: Về đổi mới căn bản, toàn diện giáo dục và đào tạo, đáp ứng yêu cầu công nghiệp hóa, hiện đại hóa trong điều kiện kinh tế thị trường định hướng xã hội chủ nghĩa và hội nhập quốc tế*.
- 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.  
doi:10.1080/00220388.2017.1380797.
- Dang, Hai-Anh H.; Glewwe, Paul; Lee, Jongwook; Vu, Khoa (2022) : The Impact Evaluation of Vietnam’s Escuela Nueva (New School) Program on Students’ Cognitive and Non-cognitive Skills, GLO Discussion Paper, No. 1017, Global Labor Organization (GLO), Essen.
- De Almeida, J.A.T. (2021) ‘The Best Public Education in Brazil: Considerations From Behavior Analysis of Culture in the Educational System of Sobral’, *Behavior and social issues*, 30(1), pp. 383–396. doi:10.1007/s42822-020-00042-y.

DeJaeghere, J., Duong, B. and Dao, V. 2021. Teaching Practices That Support Thinking and Promote Learning: Qualitative Evidence from High and Low Performing Classes in Vietnam. 2021/024. [https://doi.org/10.35489/BSG-RISE-RI\\_2021/024](https://doi.org/10.35489/BSG-RISE-RI_2021/024).

FT, 2018. “Vietnam: Very good on paper” <https://www.ft.com/content/da4387d0-aba8-11e8-8253-48106866cd8a>

Goodwin, J. (Ed.). (2012). *SAGE biographical research*. Sage.

GPE. 2013. “From Colombia to Vietnam: The Success of an Innovative School Model.” Global Partnership for Education. <<https://www.globalpartnership.org/blog/colombia-vietnam-success-innovative-school-model>>

Holland, John H. (1992). “Complex adaptive systems.” *Daedalus*, 121 (1). pp. 17–30.

Holland, John H. (1995). *Hidden Order: How Adaptation Builds Complexity*. Basic Books.

IEG 2012. ICR Review of Vietnam - Primary Education For Disadvantaged Children Project. <<https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/990261475076439509/text/000020051-20140625055832.txt>>

Kaffenberger, M. and Spivack, M., 2022. System Coherence for Learning: Applications of the RISE Education Systems Framework. RISE Working Paper Series. 22/086.

Le, H.M., 2018a. The reproduction of ‘best practice’: Following Escuela Nueva to the Philippines and Vietnam. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 62, pp.9-16.

Le, H.M., 2018b. Another textbook project? The implementation of Escuela Nueva in Vietnam. *Educational Research for Policy and Practice*, 17(3), pp.223-239.

Le, M.H., 2020. Where Be the ‘Magic Bullet’ for educational change? Vietnam and the quest of policy borrowing from abroad. *Journal of Educational Change*, 21(3), pp.455-466.

London, J., 2004. Rethinking Vietnam’s mass education and health systems. In *Rethinking Vietnam* (pp. 143-158). Routledge.

London, J.D., 2011a. Contemporary Vietnam’s Education System: Historical Roots, 1 Current Trends. In *Education in Vietnam* (pp. 1-56). ISEAS Publishing.

London, J.D., 2011. Historical welfare regimes and education in Vietnam. *Education in Vietnam*, pp.57-103.

- Luong Hoai Nam. 2014. “Giáo dục và định mệnh quốc gia.” (Education and the fate of the nation). *Viet Nam Express*. 28 August 2014. <https://vnexpress.net/giao-duc-va-dinh-menh-quoc-gia-3035920.html>
- Marr, D.G., 1981. *Vietnamese tradition on trial, 1920-1945* (Vol. 10). University of California Press.
- Marr, D.G., 1997. *Vietnam 1945: The quest for power*. Univ of California Press.
- MOET 2018. Chương trình Giáo dục Phổ thông -- Chương Trình Tổng Thể. Ministry of Education and Training. Hà Nội, 2018
- Nguyễn D.A. 2017. “Lời cuối cho VNEN.” (The last world on VNEN). *Giáo Dục Việt Nam*.<  
<https://giaoduc.net.vn/loi-cuoi-cho-vnen-post179918.gd>>
- Nguyễn, V.C., 2004. *Vấn đề lịch sử văn miếu*. (Problems in the history of the Temple of Literature.) Hưng Yên.
- Parandekar, Suhas, Futoshi Yamauchi, Andrew Ragatz, Elisabeth Sedmik and Akiko Sawamoto. 2017. “Enhancing School Quality in Vietnam through Participative and Collaborative Learning
- Peck, J., & Theodore, N. (2015). *Fast policy: Experimental statecraft at the thresholds of neoliberalism*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Polya, G., 2004. *How to solve it: A new aspect of mathematical method* (Vol. 85). Princeton university press.
- Reimers, F., 2019. *Letters to a new minister of education*. CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform.
- Reimers, F.M., 2020. *Audacious education purposes: How governments transform the goals of education systems* (p. 250). Springer Nature.
- Tuyên giáo. 2011. Summary notes from the 11<sup>th</sup> CPV Party Congress. Đại hội đại biểu toàn quốc lần thứ XI của Đảng. *Tuyên giáo*. Ba Đình, Hà Nội
- Woodside, A., 1983. The triumphs and failures of mass education in Vietnam. *Pacific Affairs*, 56(3), pp.401-427.

### **In depth interviews with Đặng Tự Ân**

17 August, 2018, Hanoi. 1’13”.

13 June, 2022, Hanoi. 1’40”.

## Additional Vietnamese language sources referenced

1. <http://rgep.moet.gov.vn/tin-tuc/lao-cai-voi-mo-hinh-truong-hoc-moi-tai-viet-nam-4636.htm>
2. <https://dantri.com.vn/giao-duc-huong-nghiep/mo-hinh-truong-hoc-moi-lam-thay-doi-dien-mao-giao-duc-lao-cai-1420983692.htm>
3. <https://dantri.com.vn/giao-duc-huong-nghiep/mo-hinh-truong-hoc-moi-lam-thay-doi-dien-mao-giao-duc-lao-cai-1420983692.htm>
4. <http://laocai.tintuc.vn/giao-duc/bat-mi-cua-hieu-truong-truong-vnen-thanh-cong-nhat-ca-nuoc-o-lao-cai.html>
5. <https://hungyentv.vn/news/95/4328/kinh-nghiem-tu-mo-hinh-hoc-vnen-o-khoai-chau>
6. <http://thnguyenbangoc.pgdlaocai.edu.vn/tin-tuc-su-kien/bao-cao/bao-cao-so-ket-01-nam-nhan-rong-mo-hinh-vnen.html>
7. Biện pháp tăng cường sự tham gia của cộng đồng vào dạy học theo mô hình trường học mới Việt Nam (VNEN) ở các trường TH, SPHN14-379.
8. Công văn số 4068/BGDĐT-GDTrH ngày 18/8/2016 của Bộ GDĐT.  
<https://thuvienphapluat.vn/cong-van/Giao-duc/Cong-van-4068-BGDDT-GDTrH-trien-khai-mo-hinh-truong-hoc-moi-voi-lop-6-lop-7-2016-327318.aspx>
9. Hướng dẫn thực hiện nhiệm vụ giáo dục tiểu học năm 2019-2020, Bộ GDĐT,  
<https://thuvienphapluat.vn/cong-van/Giao-duc/Cong-van-3869-BGDDT-GDTH-2019-huong-dan-thuc-hien-nhiem-vu-giao-duc-tieu-hoc-nam-2019-2020-422438.aspx>
10. Sở GDĐT Lào Cai, Số: 1468/SGD&ĐT - GDTH V/v hướng dẫn thực hiện nhiệm vụ Giáo dục Tiểu học năm học 2019 - 2020
11. Sở GDĐT Kiên Giang, số 1738/BC-SGDĐT, Báo cáo kết quả thực hiện nhiệm vụ năm học 2020-2021 và phương hướng, nhiệm vụ trọng tâm năm học 2021-2022
12. Sở GDĐT Nghệ An, số 1630/BC-SGDĐT, Báo cáo kết quả thực hiện nhiệm vụ năm học 2020-2021 và phương hướng, nhiệm vụ trọng tâm năm học 2021-2022
13. <https://thanhnien.vn/lo-dien-sach-giao-khoa-sau-2018-post558315.html>
14. <https://jobpro.com.vn/vnen/>
15. <https://giaoduc.net.vn/giao-duc-24h/vnen-rang-hay-cung-lam-dieu-hay-post170139.gd>
16. <https://thanhnien.vn/lo-dien-sach-giao-khoa-sau-2018-post558315.html>
17. <https://giaoducthoidai.vn/nhieu-diem-tich-cuc-o-sach-giao-khoa-moi-post396873.html>
18. <https://baothanhhoa.vn/doi-song-xa-hoi/doi-moi-sach-giao-khoa-can-cai-nhin-thuc-te/126056.htm>
19. <https://giaoduc.net.vn/giao-duc-24h/sach-giao-khoa-lop-1-co-diem-moi-song-co-qua-nhieu-kien-thuc-post207721.gd>
20. Đánh giá của Thầy Nguyễn Cao (<https://giaoduc.net.vn/giao-duc-24h/chuong-trinh-sach-giao-khoa-moi-dang-di-theo-vet-xe-do-vnen-post183683.gd>)
21. <https://moet.gov.vn/giaoducquocdan/giao-duc-tieu-hoc/Pages/default.aspx?ItemID=4978>
22. <https://giaoducthoidai.vn/vnen-co-nhieu-diem-tuong-dong-voi-de-an-doi-moi-chuong-trinh-sgk-pho-thong-moi-post36990.html>
23. <https://giaoduc.net.vn/giao-duc-24h/chuong-trinh-sach-giao-khoa-moi-dang-di-theo-vet-xe-do-vnen-post183683.gd>
24. Thông tin phỏng vấn 10 chuyên gia giáo dục ( 01 từ Bộ Giáo dục Đào tạo, 04 từ các sở Giáo dục Đào tạo, 04 từ các trường sư phạm, 01 từ Viện nghiên cứu sư phạm)